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## STRATEGIC SECURITY ANALYSIS

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# History Politicised: Russia, Ukraine and the West

by Dr Paul Vallet

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The conflict in Ukraine is, firstly, one between Ukraine and some of its inhabitants, and with Russia.<sup>1</sup> Other European States, the United States and a few other countries are directly involved as well, to an extent unprecedented in the other cases of post-Soviet 'frozen conflicts'. This is why Russian-Western tensions have markedly increased. The media, politicians as well as some international relations experts, have named this conflict a 'new Cold War'. At first, in the West, the conflict, its origins and development, were subject to open discussion and contrasted views.

The Russian government and the media, which they tightly control, have also used Cold War rhetoric. However, the Russian side interpreted the events in a more uniform way than in the West. Close examination of the events distinguishes this conflict and confrontation as far less intense and dangerous than the actual Cold War. Developments in other regions, especially in the Middle East, have captured the priorities of policy-makers, while 'Ukraine fatigue' now leads them to seek a hasty conclusion.

## KEY POINTS

- Conflicting history and its perceptions are key factors in the origins of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and in the consequent Russo-Western tensions, as well as key drivers of their evolution.
- Russia has more effectively 'weaponised' both information and history to support its case, and to support the arguments of efficient and influential opinion relays in the West, who argue for a resolution of the crisis that satisfies Russia's terms, in effect freezing the conflict.
- Allowing a frozen conflict to persist in Ukraine endangers regional security and allows for its reignition, therefore there must be effective narrative and historical counter-arguments to support Western negotiations that will lead to a more balanced and definitive settlement of the crisis.
- The current Russo-Ukrainian conflict also involves neighbouring countries belonging to the European Union (EU) and to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The crisis is perceived as the most serious crisis in both European affairs and East-West relations in general since the end of the Cold War.

<sup>1</sup> See the rich collection of essays with perspectives from all parties in Pikulicka-Wilczewska, A. & Sakwa, R. (eds.), *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, Bristol: E-International Relations, 2015.

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Fully understanding the drivers of the Russo-Ukrainian-Western conflict remains essential to researching and proposing workable solutions. Each side blames the other's actions as a central driver of the conflict. The crisis developed and escalated quickly; but it is not just a failure of dialogue and of mediation that is remarkable in this case. In many aspects, the conflict has been in the making for some years. It has a singularly historical dimension. Historic grievances and assumptions have been an important element in the parties' self-justification. This history weighs on the minds of the different actors, whether high-ranking decision-makers or ordinary citizens. It is a non-negligible factor in their behaviour.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Secretary-General Lamberto Zannier has recognised that history is indeed an important driver of this conflict.<sup>2</sup> Some observers blame the ignorance of history for the origins and logic of the conflict. Its further development and prolongation may well also originate in the weighty presence of history in the minds of the actors, in more or less slanted interpretations. Both hypotheses must account for the conflict as it has unfolded. It is also urgent to understand the diversity of the individuals in each of the parties, so as to measure which historical influences and memories motivate them.

In popular perception, the crisis originated with the November 2013 decision by then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich not to sign the planned European Association Agreement. Ensuing mass protests by Ukrainians in favour of the agreement, and their repression, led to Yanukovich's flight from Kiev on 22 February 2014 after his losing support from the Parliament.<sup>3</sup> The Russian Federation viewed the change of government in Kiev as a coup d'État<sup>4</sup>, and argued that Russian-speakers in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine faced persecution by Kiev's new authorities. Russian regular troops, posing as local militias, seized control of Crimea, while separatist Russian politicians took over the peninsula's regional institutions. Within two weeks, a referendum had been conducted requesting annexation by Russia, which was proclaimed on 16 March despite international protests.

In early April, the Donetsk and Luhansk districts were taken over by de facto authorities defying Kiev. In mid-June, the newly-elected Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko began a military campaign to recapture these secessionist districts. When Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 was shot down in July as it flew over the conflict zone, this gave an even greater international dimension to the hostilities. Fighting intensified, as Russian forces intervened in August to prevent the Donbas secessionists from defeat by Kiev's forces. Intense mediation by the OSCE under Swiss presidency, the EU and the leaders of key Member States, perhaps contained the conflict to the region, but were slow to obtain a cease-fire. The first one negotiated in Minsk in September 2014 broke down immediately. The second one occurred in February 2015, its implementation delayed for several days while pro-Russian forces eliminated a salient between Donetsk and Luhansk still held by the Ukrainians. While sporadic, the fighting has not ceased on the frontline.

The Minsk Agreements are yet to be implemented, as the signatories themselves have admitted in further meetings in February-March 2016. This conflict appears to become another of the 'frozen conflicts' in the post-Soviet space, as in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria or South Ossetia. The 'freezing' here consists of an uneasy truce, keeping the lid on hostilities, at the cost of the region's political and economic stability. The situation gives Russia leverage over the weakened governments of Ukraine and of other former Soviet republics.

Such a confused situation requires better acquaintance of the policy-maker, especially the Western kind, with the complex lines of thought and speech of the conflict's actors. These are not as uniform as either individual Ukrainians or Russians, or their respective governments, proclaim. They are split into several categories and sub-categories. In Ukraine, one must distinguish between supporters of the change of government in February 2014 and opponents, rather than among the linguistic, ethnic lines which appear in media coverage and in political discourse. It is also the case of supporters and opponents of the secession of the Donbas, where one may actually find both Ukrainian- and Russian-speakers on either side. In Russia, the government claims its policies have near unanimous backing, yet the population's stance is also diverse: while polls indicate a great deal of popular support for the annexation of Crimea, the supposedly similar approval for the secession

<sup>2</sup> On the record remarks at Chatham House European security and defence conference, London, 18 March 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Åslund, A., *Ukraine: What Went Wrong and How to Fix It*, Washington DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Statement repeated by Vladimir Putin in his interview with Bild, 11 January 2016.



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of the Donbas and for fighting to achieve it, is far less clear. The Russian population must therefore be considered as a distinct actor from its government.

The history of Russian-Ukrainian relations and the relations of their peoples were contentious issues well before the conflict emerged in 2014. Visions of how the States should relate after the dissolution of the USSR were already conditioned by a thousand years' worth of events. A key question, asked by Ukrainians as well as by Russians, and by not a few Westerners, is whether Ukraine is distinct from Russia and whether its sovereignty and separate character are considered legitimate. It is an element of the successful 'weaponisation' of information and of history by Russia in the crisis with Ukraine. The Russian line, and its Western supporters, contends that the distinction is superficial and that a natural outcome of this is Russian dominance over Ukraine and oversight over its policy choices.

The question of the distinction of Ukrainians from Russians requires examination of successive periods of history going back to the establishment of the first 'Rus' principality in Kiev circa 860 AD. Yet proto-Ukraine only joined the Tsarist Empire in the late 17th-18th centuries, after centuries of Polish-Lithuanian, Mongol or Tatar rule. The Soviet period (1917-1991) must also be considered for its legacy over current Russian-Ukrainian relations. In the years and aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, a short-lived Ukrainian bid for independence was crushed. In the interwar period, Ukraine suffered brutal Stalinist policies, especially collectivising the agriculture, which bred famine. Because of this, when the Second World War brought ferocious fighting on its territory, Ukraine saw a division between those remaining loyal to the Soviet Union and those seeking to reclaim the Ukrainian independence denied in 1921, ultimately accused of collaborating with the Nazi aggressors.

The events from 1985 onwards leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union also bear special importance in the chronicle of Ukrainian and Russian re-emergence, as the revived Ukrainian nationalism under Gorbachev's Perestroika and Glasnost policies is accused of playing a strong part in the demise of the USSR. The contemporary period splits between the early years of Ukrainian independence between 1991 and 2004, and the latter. The year 2004, with its 'Orange Revolution', appears to have been a first run of 2014, a turning point, leading to the

current crisis and conflict. In this instance the perceived Russian interference in the Ukrainian presidential election had already created lines of division in Ukraine, and fuelled Russian counter-accusations of Western interference in its close neighbour.

Russia's own history since 1991, notably the failure to democratise, and the near collapse of the economy in 1998, have their own relevance to the conflict. Since 1999, the Russian leadership has yearned to re-establish not a Communist State but a Great Russian state and hegemony over the former territories of the Tsars and of the USSR. This revived the question whether Ukraine's sovereignty and policy freedom of choice deserve consideration, either from Russia or the rest. This historical question matters because the different periods and events mentioned above have been weaponised by the parties to the conflict, and especially by Russia.

Russia's use of history has been especially applied towards influencing Western leaders and opinion. It served first to dull reactions to the annexation of Crimea, by instilling 'reasonable doubt' about the new Ukrainian government, portrayed as illegitimate and controlled by ultra-nationalist, neo-Nazi elements. The objective of historical manipulation then served to exploit divisions amongst the Europeans, and between Europeans and Americans, in order to limit sanctions, ultimately to lift them. While there has been early unity on the adoption of sanctions packages after the annexation of Crimea, and later during the Donbas intervention, the 'West' itself is definitely not united on the conflict. It can be split between the EU<sup>5</sup> on one hand, and on the other, the Member States.

The policy stances and interpretations of the different European states diverge along geographic lines, dividing many of the original, Western EU 15, from the East, Central and Scandinavian Europeans who joined in 1995-2004. The Baltics and East-Central Europeans have considerable experience of neighbourhood with Russia, predating Soviet dominance of the area in 1945-1990. They have shared some of Ukraine's historical experiences. This explains their drive to join both the EU and NATO after the Cold War. Being treated as the 'Near Abroad' of Russia

5 Very full literature review and assessment of EU-Russian relations in the chapter by Anke Schmidt-Felzmann « European Foreign Policy Towards Russia: Challenges, Lessons and Future Avenues for Research » in Jorgensen, K.E., Aarstad, A. K., Drieskens, E., Laatikainen, K. & Tonra, B. (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of European Foreign Policy*, vol. 2, London: Sage Publications, 2015.

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by Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet governments has left its mark. Russia sees this defiance, and exploits it in appeals to the more receptive opinions of Western Europeans.

The major Western European countries, Germany, France, Britain and Italy have their own historical relations with Russia, often based on a peer-to-peer basis, as Great Powers, key players in the 'Concert of Europe', and on the world stage as empires. This history stretches back to the 1500s, and can have the curious effect of blinding these countries to yet similarly lengthy histories of relations with the Central European countries. The Western Europeans are viewed as especially sensitive to the argument that the new Ukrainian government is the heir to ultra-nationalists who fought alongside the Nazis in World War II, or of extremists blamed for the dissolution of the USSR and its ensuing regional chaos. Eastern Europeans are less likely to be targeted with such historical arguments because of their own memorial contests with Russia; but Russia can and does exploit the current dissatisfactions and policy disagreements that the Eastern Member States have with the Western-dominated Brussels institutions.

Germany's role as key mediator stemmed from its long-standing policy cooperation with Russia, especially in negotiating the second Minsk cease-fire. It was assisted by France, which devised the "Normandy Format" of meetings of the Russian, Ukrainian, German and French leaderships in June 2014. Influential political, economic and media interests in both countries argued in favour of Russia's narrative to solve the conflict swiftly and to lift sanctions, despite the poor implementation of the Minsk Agreements. Ironically, Germany once considered Ukraine as a subject in both the World Wars. French, and also British relations with Russia are still impacted by the histories of wartime alliances, and as peers as permanent members of the UN Security Council. It is in light of these contrasting older histories and memories that the more recent history, that of the evolution and eastward expansion of Europe to include countries of the fallen Soviet empire, must be read.

Yet not all Western Europeans, indeed not all Germans or Frenchmen share this view. The German government has remained firm on maintaining sanctions while Minsk 2 is unimplemented. The Netherlands, whose citizens made up a majority of Flight MH17's victims, also have a particular stance on the

conflict.<sup>6</sup> Both the United States and Canada, with sizeable Ukrainian diasporas, have followed the conflict closely, allowing Russia to accuse US policy and institutions of provoking regime change in Kiev. The US government has had an awkward task of prodding the Europeans towards firmness, and the Kiev government towards the necessary reforms required by Minsk 2. Each of Washington's interventions is deplored by Moscow, and by its Western European backers.<sup>7</sup>

Some observers of Russia's adverse reaction to government change in Kiev argue that the advance of European political and security organizations to the Russian borders, chiefly in the form of the 1999 and 2004 NATO enlargements, paired with that of the EU in 2004, constituted a provocation. They argue that consistent Russian disapproval and warnings since 1991 were disregarded. They claim a private, verbal promise was made by the US political leadership to then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev before German unification, not to extend Western institutions to Soviet or Russian borders. The American side has seldom confirmed such an assurance was ever given. There are few arguments suggesting it might have the political and legal force of subsequent, and indisputable, public agreements: the Bucharest protocol of 1994 and the 1997 Russian-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty, in which Russia did guarantee Ukraine's sovereignty and territory. These were denounced by the annexation of Crimea and support for the Donbas secession. This shows the extent to which historical narratives are culled, fashioned and edited to suit policy-making.

There is ample historical material from public policy, academic or media debates from the 1990s to the 2000s, demonstrating that the extension of both NATO and the EU were considerably discussed and even delayed.<sup>8</sup>

6 At the conference « Russie-Europe : Comment sortir de la crise ? » held at the Université de Genève on 10 December 2015, the author asked the Russian, French, German and Swiss government officials sitting on the panel whether they thought a full light on the MH17 tragedy should be part of the reconciliation process between the parties. None of the participants accepted to answer.

7 Dutch Euroskeptics campaigning against ratification of the EU-Ukraine agreement in the April 6 consultative referendum have taken as argument the Russian allegations that this association policy was manufactured in Washington rather than in Europe.

8 On NATO enlargement debates in the 1990s, see Solomon, G. B. *The NATO enlargement debate 1990-1997: blessings of liberty*, Westport CT & Washington DC: Praeger CSIC, 1998. For contemporary discussions on the consequences of EU enlargement and the birth of the European Neighborhood Policy, see Beurdeley, L., De La Brosse, R., Maron, F. (eds.), *L'Union Européenne et ses espaces de proximité. Entre stratégie inclusive et partenariats renouvelés: quell avenir pour le nouveau voisinage de l'Union?*, Brussels: Bruylant, 2007 and Rouet, G. & Terem, P. (eds.), *Élargissement et politique européenne de voisinage*.

Far from accelerated and hastily conceived, the process was complicated by Western consideration for Russian feelings. This frustrated the East Central European governments, whose reform process was tied to swift adherence to the West's institutional norms. Much of that history, especially since 2004, is now side-lined in policy analysis and justification, not only in Russia but more importantly, among Western governments, as if pleading guilty to the Russian accusations of provocation and ignoring historical legacies. This is a constituent element of the "Ukraine fatigue" motivating the Western search for an arrangement with Russia. "Ukraine fatigue" also stems from other current events, not least the political, economic and moral failings of the new Ukrainian government throughout 2015 and 2016.

From 2013 to 2016, other crises distracted attention from the Russo-Ukrainian-Western conflict. Crises in the Middle East-North Africa region have led Russian, American and European policy makers to lose a sense of priority in solving the Moscow-Kiev, East-West dispute. Besides, in light of the Crimean Tatar population and the adjoining Black Sea, Turkey is also a protagonist. Still recently, including Ukraine into the European fold was suggested to balance the prospect of Turkish membership in the EU. Yet Turkey's threat-heavy environment is no different from Ukraine's.

Western relations with Russia were already degraded, perhaps decisively so, by the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. However, in Moscow's interpretation, the Arab revolutions in 2011 echo the "Colour revolutions" of 2003-2004. The same suspicion of Western responsibility for this latter political upheaval prevails in the Kremlin's analysis. Russian leaders have other objectives in the Middle East-North Africa region: first, to make the case for Russian cooperation with the West to address this region's troubles – Israel-Palestine, Iran, Syria ; second, to shift Western attention away from, or generate complacency towards, Russian pressure over its East Central European "Near Abroad".

In late 2013, the crisis over Syrian chemical weapons dominated Western preoccupations while the Yanukovich government was pressed to desist from the EU Association Agreement. In the summer of 2014, the escalating Israeli-Palestinian tensions and the campaign against Gaza, shifted attention away from the downing

of Flight MH17 and from Russian intervention in Donbas. In 2015, Russia's build-up and intervention in Syria also generated Western distance from the inconclusive follow-up and dysfunctions of the Minsk 2 ceasefire.

Vague claims about the "quietness" of the Donbas frontlines were used as argument to lift European sanctions against Russia even before the launch of Russia's Syrian air campaign. This argument has increased since, especially in France after the November 13 terrorist attacks. Some present Russia as an indispensable partner in eradicating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and therefore, Russia must be accommodated with over Ukraine.

To conclude: the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and Russo-Western tensions originate in a set of divergent, old and recent historical grievances, both between the immediate Russian and Ukrainian parties, and between Russia and the Western European and North American states. Its remoter historical origins as well as its more immediate historical unfolding have been slanted in reporting to the public as well as in interpretation by governments and weighing on policy-decisions. It has been recently side-lined by preoccupations over other crises and regions. These characteristics of the Russo-Ukrainian-Western conflict yield several lessons.

Beyond its own gravity as such, the conflict is complex to resolve by parties whose behaviour is both unpredictable and dogmatic. It illustrates the problems caused by the interaction of History and Policy-Making. Older and recent histories have shaped decisions and perceptions of the situation, resulting in conflict. They also shape how the conflict unfolds and endures, despite understanding of its dangers if left unchecked and unresolved. While it might be beyond the scope of policy-making to make the parties adopt a unified point of view and historical understanding of the question, it appears essential that negotiators and publics be thoroughly briefed on long-term and more immediate historical characteristics of the conflict; not only their own, but, crucially, that of all the other implicated parties.

The limits of Minsk 2 - agreements aiming for an immediate halt to the fighting - are not only obvious in the poor enforcement of the armaments withdrawal clauses which have made moot points of further confidence-building measures. They are in the continued incapacity, or unwillingness, of parties to adequately measure

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the mind-frames of their antagonists. That the conflict is left frozen, rather than resolved, is no surprise. Current discussions, to the little extent that they are taking place, continue to airbrush historical arguments, whether true or distorted, out of the negotiating agenda. Policy is being formulated either in contradiction to the parties' own policy history and coherence, or divorced from these under a pretence of "realpolitik".

Yet, "realpolitik" calls for accurate historical assessment and proportional weighing of conflicting interests. The West feels that it has little leverage over Russia, and is tempted to give in to subtle Russian pressure to drop the matter, taking as its own the Russian narrative of events. This will not solve the conflict but is likely to perpetuate it. There is little to be gained by any of the parties in such continued hostility. A strengthened Western negotiating position must rely on a more solid, less guilt-ridden, and confidence in the force of its own historical case; whereas more Russian intellectual openness to listening to the opposite narratives is necessary for Russia's own case and actions to be understood. The least pessimistic outlook for this conflict lies in these elements being far better understood by the negotiating parties, and in their making better efforts to explain their case to their wider publics.

## About the author

Dr Paul Vallet is an Associate Fellow in the Global Fellowship Initiative at the GCSP. He has taught European, American and Russian History and politics at universities in France and the United States, among which Sciences Po Paris and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

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Maison de la paix  
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2D  
P.O. Box 1295  
CH-1211 Geneva 1  
Tel: + 41 22 730 96 00  
Fax: + 41 22 730 96 49  
e-mail: [info@gcsp.ch](mailto:info@gcsp.ch)  
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