5. Does Ukraine Still Matter?

Mykhailo Minakov

The short answer to the question in this chapter's title is "YES". Ukraine is likely to remain at the center of attention in all major geopolitical centers for the foreseeable future. The biggest and most important of Russia's neighbors, Ukraine and the crisis it is currently dealing with matters more and more for Europe, Russia and the entire post-Soviet region.

However the full answer needs to reveal how Russia's Ukraine policy has changed the entire post-Soviet region and created problems for the realization of many of Russia's own integration goals in the region. Essentially, none of the post-Soviet nations can exist the way they did before the annexation of Crimea and the Donbass War.

Russia's Ukraine policy consists of a number of unprecedented decisions to use all means available, including military, to prevent Ukraine from becoming a member of NATO and the EU, and keep it in the Russian sphere of influence. As Dmitry Trenin rightly stated, this policy has had two objectives: taking over Crimea, and federalizing Ukraine[1]. Implementation of the first objective would not permit NATO to establish bases in Crimea while achievement of the second would fulfill Moscow's plans to initially create obstacles to Ukraine's European integration, and then to re-integrate Ukraine into the Russia-led Eurasian Union. Whatever real or imagined threats were behind it, so far Russia's Ukraine policy has led to destruction of the international order of the Helsinki Accord and of Budapest Memorandum post-Soviet stability.

Predictably, this policy has destructively influenced Russia-Ukraine relations. Since December 2013 the ties between Ukraine

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[1] D. Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and Resumption of Great Power Rivalry*, Moscow, Carnegie Moscow Center, 2014, pp. 6-7.

and Russia have been unprecedentedly deteriorating. This deterioration reached its lowest level when the hostile attitudes of the elites and citizens of the two neighboring nations were institutionalized and started to have lasting impact on relations between their governments, and on non-involved parties in Eastern Europe and Western Eurasia. Since 2015 Russia-Ukraine relations have reached a historical minimum with a possibility of worsening further and widening the conflict to other countries of the former Soviet region.

The depth and breadth of this influence stems from the fact that, unlike after the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, the Crimean annexation and military support of separatists in southeastern Ukraine were a lengthy process leading to an institutionalization of the conflict. Russia's Ukraine policy hinged on a long-term process of estrangement not only between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the West, but also between Russia and other post-Soviet countries.

The decisions to take over Crimea and support the military actions of separatists have led to a reaction from NATO. By 2016 NATO and Russia's security systems started regarding each other as possible enemies again. On the last day of 2015 President Putin introduced a new National Security Strategy[2]. The strategy is directed against NATO and American dominance in world affairs:

> Expanding the force potential of NATO and endowing it with global functions that are implemented in violation of international legal norms, the bloc's heightened military activity, its continued expansion and the approach of its military infrastructure to Russian borders, all create a threat to national security.

The strategy has also included an official interpretation of events in Ukraine as a "coup-d'état" and a "source of instability in Europe and near Russian borders" (article 17).

In response, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg declared

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[2] "Strategiia natsionalnoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii", *Russkaia Gazeta*, 31 January 2015, http://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html

Russia to be the culprit "destabilizing the European security order" at the Munich Security Conference (13 February 2016)[3]. He also added that

> Russia's actions in Ukraine have triggered a robust response from the international community. Involving sanctions, suspension from the G-8, and increased support for our eastern partners. And NATO is undertaking the biggest strengthening of our collective defense in decades. To send a powerful signal to deter any aggression or intimidation. Not to wage war, but to prevent war.

Later, on 17 March 2016, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, while listing five global strategic challenges for USA, named Russia as one of two most "stressing competitors." The US Defense Secretary declared that his policy is based on a "strong and balanced approach to deter Russian aggression" in Eastern Europe[4].

The above statements show the correctness of the prognosis made by ISPI analysts last year: competition for control of post-Soviet space between Moscow and the West went on, and increased the conflict between the two geopolitical centers[5].

Nonetheless the big geopolitical players' growing competition should not prevent them from seeing deepening cleavages emerging in the post-Soviet region where Russian hegemony is now being disputed even among Eurasian Union member states. Consequently, in this chapter I will analyze how (1) Ukraine's political system, (2) Belarus and Kazakhstan regimes, as well as (3) how post-Soviet un-recognized states reacted to the Crimean annexation and the Donbass War. I will show that the Russian – Ukrainian conflict has proliferated to the point that requires

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[3] "Speech by NATO Secretary General J. Stoltenberg at the Munich Security Conference", NATO Official Website, 13 February 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_128047.htm?selectedLocale=en

[4] "Carter Outlines Security Challenges, Warns Against Sequestration", US Department of Defense Official Website, 17 March 2016, http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/696449/carter-outlines-security-challenges-warns-against-sequestration

[5] A. Ferrari (ed.) *Beyond Ukraine. EU and Russia in Search of a New Relation*, Milan, Edizioni Epoké-ISPI, 2015, p. 9ff.

Moscow to deeply review its approaches to dealing with the so called "near abroad" countries and Russian integration projects in the post-Soviet region.

Institutionalization of conflict in Ukraine

The post-Maidan Ukrainian political system has undergone a two-year-long recovery process from the internal shock of regime change and external blow from the annexation of Crimea and Russia's support for the separatists' revolt. The Euromaidan uprising not only ousted previous rulers; it re-established the pre-Yanukovych constitutional order and the parliamentary-presidential system in Ukraine. This transformation, and the need to adequately respond to the loss of Crimea and the war with the Russian-backed separatists have profoundly changed Ukraine's political institutions and the behavior of its elites.

Up until 2013 the Ukrainian government was able to practice dualism in its integration policies: for over two decades Kiev was able to be flexible in its foreign policy towards the European Union and Russian Federation. In doing so, Ukraine succeeded in gaining partial integration into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, created in 1992 when Ukraine was an associate member only) and Free Trade Zone with Russian (since 2012). The same delicate integration took place with the EU, which led to the Association Agreement (AA). The process of AA preparation started under Prime Minister Yanukovych's supervision in 2006 and was finalized during the presidency of Victor Yanukovych in 2013.

This form of limited integration was called a "soft" one[6]. As Kateryna and Roman Wolczuk justly pointed out, this type of integration "was supported by cross-party political consensus"[7]. The

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[6]   R. Dragneva, "Is 'Soft' Beautiful? Another Perspective on Law, Institutions, and Integration in the CIS", *Review of Central and East European Law*, 2009, No. 29, pp. 279-324; K. Wolczuk, R. Wolczuk, *'Soft is Beautiful…!' Ukraine's Approach to Regional Integration*, G. Brogi, M. Dyczok, O. Pachlovska, G. Siedina (eds.), *Ukraine Twenty Years After Independence*, Roma, Aracne, 2015, pp. 27-38.

[7]   *Ibid.*, p. 27.

balance between the two forms of integration was one of the constitutional principles of Ukraine's political system. No matter who was in charge of Ukraine, Kiev was good at balancing between the West and the East until the two geopolitical projects of Europe and Eurasia started increasing their gravitation in the second decade of this century. The stability of Ukraine's political system was put under pressure when both integration directions were becoming stronger in the frameworks of the Eurasian Customs Union and Association with the EU.

Anti-Russian elites' consensus

With the enactment of Crimean secession supported by Russian army units, asylum for the run-away President Yanukovych, the Duma's approval of sending the Russian Army to Ukraine (on 1 March 2014), and support for separatist troops in Donbass, relations between Kiev and Moscow reached the level of open conflict. As the recent publication of the minutes of the Ukrainian Security Council (as of 28 February 2014) show[8], the provisional government in Kiev was already aware of the scale of force used by Russian authorities to take over Crimea[9]. The debates of the Council members actually mapped the future attitudes of Ukrainian power elites *vis-à-vis* Russia. Some of the Council members demanded the Ukrainian military's active resistance to foreign intervention, while others demanded diplomatic solutions. The "pacifists" won, and Ukraine's Permanent Representative to the UN requested an urgent meeting with the UN Security Council seeking support to prevent full-scale Russian military intervention into Ukraine[10]. At the same time, deployment of armed forces was abstained from in Crimea.

These two attitudes have now become the major forms of

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[8] The full version of the minutes is accessible at: *Ukrainska Pravda*, 22 February 2016, http://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2016/02/22/7099911/

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] "Letter dated 28 February 2014 from the Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council", UN Official Website, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/136

dealing with Russia by Ukrainian political elites. In the 2014 parliamentary campaign the "hawks" (Yatsenyuk's National Front, Tymoshenko's Batkivshyna, Lyashko's Radical Party etc.) demanded war until all the territories were returned to Ukraine. The "doves" (Poroshenko's bloc, the opposition bloc, Samopomich) were relying on Western support in diplomatic efforts and economic sanctions to stop the war, and reintegrate Donbass and Crimea. Quite understandably, due to the war situation, there were no pro-Russian political groups participating in the elections. At the national level the political elites reached consensus on one issue: until all the communities and territories are returned to Ukraine, the Russian Federation is to be officially regarded as an enemy.

This consensus was not shared by regional elites in this period. In 2014 – early 2015 the local Councils of southeastern Ukraine debated whether they should proclaim Russia an "aggressor" as demanded by Kiev and patriotic citizens. In spite of the continuing war, during the local elections of 2015 some communities supported local leaders with pro-Russian sympathies (e.g. the mayor of Kharkiv, Gennady Kernes and the mayor of Odessa, Gennady Trukhanov). However, newly elected Councils – including Kharkiv and Odessa – voted for Russia's "aggressor" status in February 2016. At the level of smaller local Councils, basically all of them have voted in favor of the patriotic motion, including the Donbass settlements under Ukrainian control.

The long period of the Donbass War created a stably negative view of the Russian Federation among national and local power elites. This was never the case before 2014. This new consensus creates limits for future reconciliation and cooperation between Ukraine and Russia.

Two years of war and the elites' consensus have also made an impact on Ukrainian citizens. As recent polls made by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology and Moscow-based "Levada Center" show, the hostility between Ukrainians and Russians has grown considerably in 2015-16. In Ukraine 36 per cent of respondents have positive attitudes toward Russia (it was about 80

per cent in 2013), and in Russia 27 per cent of respondents have positive views toward Ukraine (it was about 70 per cent in 2013). The amount of Ukrainians who are negatively disposed toward Russia rose to 47 per cent in January 2016, while in 2013 it was less than 10 per cent. In Russia the amount of those negatively disposed to Ukraine is 59 per cent, whereas in 2013 it was a bit more than 10 per cent. The poll also shows that 22 per cent of eastern Ukrainians hold strongly negative views about Russia in 2016[11].

It is important to stress that this negative attitude of Ukrainians towards Russia is not channelled into militant expectations. Another Kiev International Institute of Sociology poll showed that the vast majority of Ukrainians support a peaceful resolution of the conflict with Russia[12].

Personal experiences with war and war-connected socio-economic effects have changed the Ukrainians' usual sympathy towards Russia. This change diminishes chances for any potential Ukraine integration process in the eastward direction. There is simply no room for "soft" elites' choices in the near- to mid-term future.

Institutionalization of the conflict

If power elites were quick to formulate their attitudes towards Russia, public institutions were very slow in reacting to the critical situations of war, annexation and economic crisis. Nevertheless, by 2016 Ukraine developed effective institutions to implement both diplomatic and security objectives articulated by ruling groups.

Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has gone through a tremendous development phase: from a humble institution mainly focused on economic issues to an active agency able to promptly react to – and often prevent – the critical situations between

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[11] "Changes In the Attitude of the Ukrainians Toward Russia And of the Russians Toward Ukraine", KIIS Official Website, 11 March 2016, http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=608&page=1

[12] "Socio-Political Situation In Ukraine: February-March, 2016", KIIS Official Website, 16 March 2016, http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=610&page=1

Ukraine and Russia. Taking into account the disproportion of the geopolitical weight between Ukraine and Russia, Ukrainian diplomacy had to use an asymmetric approach to limiting the negative impact of Russia's Ukrainian policy. Officially Kiev developed ties with the diplomatic corps of Washington, Brussels, Berlin, and Paris that have leveraged Russia's power. This policy was developed based on consensus between Ukrainian political parties that created a ruling coalition in November 2014. The Coalition Agreement provides for "filing international claims against the Russian Federation in the interests of the state of Ukraine"[13].

Later the institutional framework for Ukraine's Russia policy was formulated in the decree "On the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine's Address to the United Nations, European Parliament, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, GUAM Parliamentary Assembly, and the parliaments of the states of the world about acknowledgement of the Russian Federation an aggressor state" as of 27 January 2015. This policy treats Russia as a major source of risks for Ukraine's security and blames Russia's government for Crimean annexation and support for separatists in Donbass.

Ukraine's Russia policy was defined in the Analytical Report of the President's Address to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine in 2015[14]. In it Russia was mentioned 644 times, all in negative terms as a source of risks for Ukraine's security and European aspirations. This policy has directed the institutional development of Ukrainian diplomatic services.

A special source for Ukrainian diplomacy development was the Minsk peace talks process. On February 12, 2015 in Minsk, the leaders of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine, as well as representatives of pro-Russian separatists, signed an agreement to end fighting in eastern Ukraine. The deal included a ceasefire in eastern

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[13] Cited from: *Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2015*, Kiev, E. Stiftung, 2015, p. 96.

[14] See report at: "AnalitychnyizvitzaShchorichnymzvernenniamPrezydentadoVerkhovnoii Rady", Ukrainian President's Official Website, 13 February 2016, http://www.president. gov.ua/en/news/shorichne-poslannya-prezidenta-ukrayini-do-verhovnoyi-radi-u-35412

Ukraine, to begin on 15 February, followed by the withdrawal of heavy weapons. Since that time for almost 14 months the peace talks continued in several sub-groups where a new generation of Ukrainian diplomats learned to cooperate with their Western colleagues and deal with the Russian diplomats.

Ukraine's government has also established a set of UN- and OSCE-mediated horizontal networks that are able to quickly react to the humanitarian situation in the war zone. So far the risks of hunger and epidemics for the population living in the war zone have been effectively resolved. The same networks have helped advance the infrastructure to support 1.5 mln displaced people in Ukraine[15].

Creation of crisis-oriented diplomacy coincided with security sector reform in Ukraine. By the end of 2015 the Ukrainian army had become one of the largest military forces in Europe. It increased in size from 146,000 soldiers in 2013 to 280,000 soldiers in November 2015[16]. Unlike in previous "soft" integration periods, the current Ukrainian army is well versed in permanent defense actions with experienced staff at all levels.

In contrast to the "soft" integration times when Ukraine's security sector was poorly financed (about 1per cent of GDP, with questionable spending effectiveness), the Kiev government increased military and security spending to 5 per cent of GDP in 2016, which amounts to US$4 bln. In addition to the growing security budget, the government addressed the usual post-Soviet corruption in military structures. In the spring of 2015 an online procurement system was launched to serve all Ministry of Defense tenders. As reported by the Ministry, the number of companies submitting bids for its contracts has increased by 50 per cent since the online system began to function.

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[15] Figures from: International Displacement Monitoring System data, 11 April 2016, http://www.internal-displacement.org/europe-the-caucasus-and-central-asia/ukraine/figures-analysis

[16] "Ukraine's military has rebounded despite budget and battle woes", McClatchDC Website, 9 November 2015, http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article43759791.html

The situation concerning the quality of officers and soldiers has also improved in recent years. The army and other security agencies increased a number of contracted specialists who go through special training centers. These centers combine trainers from Ukraine and NATO academies. Also, NATO member states support technical defense cooperation with Ukraine[17]. If in February 2014 Ukraine had neither politicians nor security staff to defend its borders, today the situation has drastically changed.

Ukraine's diplomatic and security efforts in 2015-2016 were coordinated with the EU and US governments. Ukraine's asymmetric response to Russia's Ukrainian policy resulted in the introduction of sanctions against Russian individuals and businesses by the United States, the European Union, and a number of other states. The first sanctions, which included the suspension of cooperation with Russia in the areas of military matters, space, investment, and travel, were introduced by the Western states on 17 March 2014, the day of the Crimean referendum. The sanctions grew constantly throughout 2014-2015 in three waves, each one increasing obstacles to the West's cooperation with the Russian Federation. These sanctions were imposed to limit the Russian government's ability to sustain its Ukrainian policy.

Russia has also introduced sanction regimes against Ukraine and its Western allies. As assessed by *Die Welt* experts in June 2015, the bi-lateral sanctions regime may cost about 100 bln euros to EU member states if continued to 2017[18]. Despite division between the EU's member states regarding sanctions, the EU ratified sanctions against Russia in December 2015. The US government made the same decision. Even though the efficiency of sanctions was questioned by politicians and experts, they remained a major tool of the West to respond to Russia's continued control over Crimea and support for Donbass separatists.

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[17] "Relations with Ukraine", NATO Official Website, 11 April 2016, http://www. nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37750.htm#

[18] "Russland-Krise kostet Europa bis zu 100 Milliarden Euro", *Die Welt*, 19 June 2015, http://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article142742046/Russland-Krise-kostet-Europa-bis-zu-100-Milliarden-Euro.html

The Ukrainian government imposed sanctions on Russia later then its allies: they were enacted on 14 August 2014. This delay was connected with attempts to prepare the economy for the loss of ties with the Russian market. Ukraine's sanctions were against 172 individuals and 65 entities in Russia and other countries for "supporting and financing terrorism" in Ukraine[19]. Since that time business ties with Russia have worsened. In 2013, 5 per cent of Russia's imports consisted of Ukrainian products, while 24 per cent of Ukrainian exports went to the Russian market. In 2015 Ukraine's exports to Russia shrunk by 60 per cent, and Russian exports to Ukraine decreased by 66 per cent, as reported by the Ukrainian Statistics Office in December 2015.

The trade conflict continued in early 2016. As ordered by the Russian President, on 1 December 2016 the Free Trade Zone between Russia and Ukraine was suspended. The need for these measures was driven by the implementation of a free trade zone agreement between Ukraine and the European Union. In response, the Ukrainian government decided to ban the import of Russian goods, including meat, grain, baked goods, alcohol, cigarettes, household chemicals and many heavy industrial products as of 10 January 2016.

By the end of February 2016 Ukraine almost fully ceased its purchases of gas in Russia. Most of the imported energy comes from the EU now. Traditionally close ties between producers of military supplies are now broken. In the midst of the ongoing war, Ukrainian military exports to Russia have been fully prohibited. The transportation of goods through the territories of the two countries to others has many legal and practical obstacles. The Ukrainian government has also refused to pay back a US$3 bln debt to Russia, regarding it as support for the "Yanukovych regime", not the state of Ukraine. Financial, trade, and industrial cooperation between Ukraine and Russia has reached a historic minimum, and may possibly worsen.

These broken ties cost a lot to the economies of both countries.

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[19] "Ukraine approves law on sanctions against Russia", *Reuters*, 14 August 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-sanctions-kiev-idUSKBN0GE0YI20140814

However, economic operators see no future resolution of the con-flict, have started looking for new partners and define their de-velopment strategies ignoring the other's interests. These strategic choices lessen the willingness of Ukrainian business groups to co-operate with their Russian counterparts. In other words, emerging post-crisis economic operators will not be willing to back Russian – Ukrainian cooperation.

To sum up: the political and economic institutions that sup-ported deep and comprehensive cooperation between post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine are either ruined or dysfunctional today. The new political and economic institutions are structured in a way that does not support possible cooperation in the short and/or middle term prospective. The new political groups in Ukraine have stably hostile attitudes towards Russia and its Ukraine policy.

Russia and Ukraine have institutionalized their conflict and will have to invest a lot of efforts and resources into a future normaliza-tion of relations.

Belarus and Kazakhstan concerns

Russia's Ukraine policy provoked lasting distress for all post-Soviet countries. The Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances signed on 5 December 1994 stipulated security assurances against threats or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan in exchange for these countries' adherence to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Consequently, Crimea's annexation has actu-ally had much broader significance than just the initiation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It has ruined the legitimate expectations of new post-Soviet nations to have post-1994 borders secured and respected by all powers in the region.

Russia's decision to annex Crimea and support Novorossian separatism has been a source of special concern for Russia's two closest allies, Belarus and Kazakhstan. These two authoritarian

regimes[20] joined Russia in the Eurasian Customs Union, and used its opportunities to benefit their economies and stability of their regimes. But with the Budapest Memorandum violated, Alexander Lukashenko and Nursultan Nazarbayev started taking active measures to decrease chances of offence to their countries.

The governments of Belarus and Kazakhstan have been equally willing to mediate the conflict between Russia and Ukraine since early 2014, while jointly refusing to support Russia's invasion of Crimea in March 2014. At the same time, both regimes were interested in not letting the Ukraine revolution expand into their domains. Both rulers, president Lukashenko and president Nazarbayev, intended to prevent the growth of separatism inspired by the Novorossia revolt. Yet in spite of the similarity of the two regimes and the presence of big Russian communities in their countries, Minsk and Astana acted differently to preserve their countries' sovereignty and independence.

Kazakhstan and political solution

Russia's Ukraine policy has put pressure on Kazakhstan's long-standing, multi-vectored foreign policy. This policy was designed approximately the same way as in Ukraine, except for the fact that Astana had to balance the competing interests of Russia, China and the West in Central Asia. With the Russian army entering Crimea and a propaganda campaign demanding support for Russian-speaking populations abroad, the Kazakhstan government feared if its own borders would remain safe and its Russian community loyal. Also, as Eugene Rumer and Paul Stronski stressed, President Nazarbayev was regretting his decision to make his country a non-nuclear-weapon state: from being a source of international acclaim, this decision turned out to be "controversial after Russia's intervention in Ukraine". The Russian government's disrespect for the Budapest Memorandum in the case of Ukraine in 2014,

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[20] "Both countries have long had the 'non free' status in the Freedom in the World Index", Freedom House, 2015, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015

and the West's inability to act as guarantee for the Memorandum, worried "Kazakhstan's political elites and raised questions among them about Russia's long-term reliability as an ally, neighbor, and trading partner"[21]. Kazakhstan's regime had to adapt to new risks coming from Russia's new behavior in the post-Soviet region.

Kazakhstan is home to the largest Russian community in Central Asia: Russians constitute a quarter of the Kazakhstan population and live mainly in the northeast borderlands of the country. The Kazakhstan government had every reason to worry that this community might be regarded as one in need of Russia's "humanitarian operation." In the 1990s there had been ethnic tensions and separatist groups in the area.

Astana responded to the Ukrainian crisis in two ways: it tried to appease Moscow to the level that Kazakhstan's national interests could permit, but Nursultan Nazarbayev also insured the security of his regime and increased China's political and economic presence in the country. He also attempted to engage more with the US, but the American focus moved away from Afghanistan and Central Asia.

In the critical period of the Russia-Ukraine conflict from March to May 2014, President Nazarbayev refused to support deployment of the Russian army in Crimea. At the same, in contrast with this decision, he recognized the outcome of the Crimean referendum and abstained with Russia from the 2014 UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262 that declared the annexation of Crimea invalid. He has also repeatedly offered to hold talks to resolve the conflict in Ukraine. This contradictory position did not satisfy the Kremlin, but Astana kept a low profile in responding to official Moscow dissatisfaction. Later, when the Donbass War intensified in late 2014 – early 2015, the Kazakhstan government increased its distance from Moscow in the international arena.

Also, Astana continued its talks with the EU in the framework of Eastern Partnership policy. Sending Moscow a sign, Kazakhstan

and the EU signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in December 2015. At the same time, this agreement has very ambiguous stipulations that would not give Moscow grounds for open disagreement.

Furthermore, Nursultan Nazarbayev invited Ukrainian President Poroshenko on an official visit in October 2015. Behind the official rhetoric regarding the need for quick resolution of the Donbass War, the two presidents reached agreements to increase trade relations. Although these plans did not take effect due to the Russian-Ukrainian trade war in January 2016, the very fact of a Eurasian Custom Union member's readiness to increase cooperation with Ukraine was showing Nazarbayev's confidence in his increased security based on internal reforms conducted in 2015.

The more consequential set of policies were fulfilled in the internal politics of Kazakhstan. First of all, to avoid uncertainties resulting from the growing economic crisis and Russia's unpredictability, President Nazarbayev declared early presidential elections scheduled for 26 April 2015. He easily won these elections with over 80 per cent of votes in his favor. At the same time he purged his surroundings of any person aspiring to be his successor. Nazarbayev's regime made the national elites sure of his willingness to defend his sovereignty and provide social order in return for holding power.

After establishing the security of his own government, President Nazarbayev launched reforms of the political system at all levels, from local to national. Security services and local administrations were given much more responsibility to ensure order and loyalty in all communities around the country. The government inspired the internal migration of Kazakhs into territories densely populated by Russians[22]. Kazakhstan began 2016 more than ready for uncertainties created by Russia's Ukraine policy precedents.

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[22] "Stress Tests for Kazakhstan, Europe and Central Asia Briefing", *International Crisis Group*, No. 74, 13 May 2015, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/kazakhstan/b074-stress-tests-for-kazakhstan.aspx

Belarus and the issue of security forces

After the launch of Crimean annexation Belarus turned out to be the last peaceful country in the region. As Balazs Jarabik has noted, "Belarus is now the only country in the EU's Eastern Partnership with full territorial integrity (the others being Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine)"[23]. All the other EaP countries have problems with the separated territories and new realities created by the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Just like Kazakhstan, Belarus is highly integrated with Russia in demographic, economic, political, and military terms. However, there are no regions with a predominantly Russian population in Belarus. Russian separatism is not that dangerous for Belarus; the problem is more with the power elites and senior security staff that are closely linked to Russia's governing groups. After the introduction of EU and US sanctions against "the last European dictator" in the early years of the 21st century, Russia became the single most important partner for Belarus. Together the two countries established the Union State and Eurasian Customs Union. In a way, it was harder for Minsk to counterbalance Russian economic and political influence than for Astana.

Russia's Ukrainian policy has forced Alexander Lukashenko to soften his stance regarding the West. In 2014-15 he rebuilt Belarus' ties to Europe and welcomed the EU and US diplomatic missions back to Minsk. To please the West, Lukashenko released several political prisoners and eased conditions for the functioning of non-politicized civil society. However, this "softening" was quite limited: all the activities of the Western missions are controlled, and economic ties with the West are no match for those with Russia.

To address the immediate risks to his personal power, President Lukashenko made all possible efforts to win the presidential elections in October 2015. He permitted three other candidates to

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[23]   B. Jarabik, "Revisiting Belarus: The Reality Beyond the Rethorics", *Carnegie Regional Insight*, 3 December 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/12/03/revisiting-belarus-reality-beyond-rhetoric

be registered. However two of them – Nikolai Ulyakhovich, a Cossack headman and chairman of the Belarusian Patriotic Party, and Sergei Gaidukevich, a chairman of the Liberal-Democratic Party – were not real competitors. Only Tatiana Korotkevich, who represented the campaign Tell the Truth! was a real opposition figure; but her electoral significance was very limited. The Central Electoral Commission declared that 83 per cent of Belarusians voted in favor of Lukashenko in the 2015 elections.

During the presidential campaign, Alexander Lukashenko addressed the "Russian threat" in a peculiar way. For example, at a meeting with Belarusian and foreign media on 29 January 2015, he informed the journalists that extremist Russian groups were active in his country and claimed he had "taken measures against them"[24]. Indeed, security services had been checking into pro-Russian civil society organizations (CSO) that proved to have been used by the Kremlin in the separatist rebellion in Ukraine. By the end of 2015 none of these CSOs could freely function in Belarus.

Simultaneously, the CSOs with links to Ukraine were put under control or dismissed. The government was preventing the import of both the Maidan and separatist revolutions into Belarus. The Belarusian volunteers who fought either on the Novorossian or on the Ukrainian side in Donbass were imprisoned upon return to the country.

Even before the presidential campaign, Alexander Lukashenko changed the senior staff of his administration and Belarus security services. All staff members suspected of cooperation with Russian security services or of having evident loyalty to Russia were moved to other positions where they could not harm the regime. However, to not irritate Moscow, the repositioning did not involve senior officers in the army[25]. Russia's covert control over the Belarus army remains significant.

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[24] "Stenogramma vstrechi A. Lukashenko s predstaviteliami SMI", Belarusian President's Official Website, 29 January 2015, http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/stenogramma-vstrechi-s-predstaviteljami-belorusskix-i-zarubezhnyx-smi-10760/
[25] This information comes from my interviews with several Belarusian officers and security experts conducted on 6-7 April 2016.

Although the higher military ranks with dual loyalty remained in place, Minsk and Moscow have begun competition in the military sphere. In January 2015, when President Putin allowed foreign nationals to serve in the Russian army, Lukashenko responded with a change in Belarusian military doctrine. It now clearly states that the "sending of armed groups, irregular forces, or mercenary groups using arms against Belarus would lead to a declaration of war"[26].

Another point of tension between the Belarusian and Russian military is Moscow's plan to establish a military air base in Belarus near Ukraine's northern border. The first time the Russian government announced this plan was in 2013. After the Ukraine crisis Moscow increased pressure on Minsk to get permission for the building works to start. Nonetheless, Alexander Lukashenko has not yet agreed with this plan, and the entire project is still being debated.

To balance those issues, Aleksandr Lukashenko did not limit the work of Russian propaganda compaigns in Belarus. As the polls of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS, Vilnius) show, the majority of Belarusians take the official Russian view of Maidan and Crimean annexation[27].

The economic situation had been worsening in Belarus since 2013 as in the rest of Eastern Europe. But Russia's estrangement from the West has also provided economic opportunities for Minsk. Russia's sanctions on European goods offered new openings for entrepreneurs in Belarus. Local businessmen were positioned to deliver the prohibited goods disguised as Belarusian products to the Russian market. And local farmers increased their export of agricultural products to Russia.

The economic ties between Russia and Belarus were also strained by several trade wars in 2014-2016. However, they were quickly

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[26]   Zakon Respubliki Belarus *Ob utverzhdenii Voiennoi doktriny Respubliki Belarus*, draft Law approved in the first reading on 5 April 2016, http://www.bsblog.info/ proekt-voennoj-doktriny-belarusi/

[27]   "March 2016: Conflict In Ukraine: A Russian View From Belarusian Eyes", ISEPS Official Website, March 2016, http://www.iiseps.org/?p=4267&lang=en

resolved and did not lead to any lasting dispute between the two governments.

To sum up, Lukashenko's strategy *vis-à-vis* Russia's Ukrainian policy was focused mainly on securing his personal security and control over key public institutions. He managed to assert his own independence, reduce the risk of separatist revolt, and increased the diplomatic balance. At the same time President Lukashenko did not eliminate dependence on Russia in the defense and economic areas.

The un-recognized post-Soviet states

The Belarusian and Kazakhstan cases demonstrate the limited menu of post-Soviet countries' reactions to Russia's Ukrainian policy. The former Soviet countries try to adapt to increasing risks of wars and separatism in Eastern Europe and Western Eurasia. At the same time, the non-recognized post-Soviet states had different reactions to the Crimean annexation and Donbass War.

After the collapse of the USSR the network of un-recognized *de facto* states emerged in the post-Soviet region. In the 1990s it included Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria. These unofficial states were established in the period between the Belavezha Agreement on the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991 and the Budapest Memorandum in 1994. Altogether these *de facto* states' population barely reaches 1 mln. For decades the governments of most of these states relied on Russian financial, military and political support. By now, these populations have gone through a specific process of their own nation-building. An element of this specificity is a hostile view towards their "recognized" neighbors and the West. If hostility to their neighbors is the outcome of civil wars and ethnic cleansing, the anger at the West results from the limitations that the global order imposed on these populations.

With Crimean annexation and the Donbass War the situation in the un-recognized states has considerably changed.

In the beginning, the case of Crimea inspired some hopes for

the same kind of integration for South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria. The analysis of debates in the media and social networks among representatives of these populations shows that in 2014 – early 2015 they cherished expectations of joining Russia as federal lands[28]. These hopes were very popular with the middle classes of these populations, while political leaders were more reserved.

Later, when the Western sanctions and trade war with Ukraine hit the Crimean population's quality of life, the hopes of Transnistrians and Abkhazians were fading. The political and economic results of Crimea's annexation resembled the same results that these populations experienced after separation in the 1990s. At the same time, the political agenda in most of the un-recognized states included the demand for future integration into the global political order. Which adds an important element to the fragility of regimes and volatility of citizens in the un-recognized states.

Secondly, the network of un-recognized states has increased due to creation of the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics (DNR-LNR). Today the DNR-LNR controlled territories (about 1/3 of Donbass) have a population of approximately 3 mln. These figures show that the proliferation of separatism has probably tripled the populations living in the network of un-recognized nations.

The analysis of open sources in the Russian, Transnistrian, Abkhazian and DNR-LNR press shows that young people that were born and/or educated in the un-recognized states were actively participating in the Donbass War on the separatist side. The political ideologies of the *de facto* states have had a strong impact on the "Novorossian idea" that in turn has a strong impact on DNR-LNR state-building. At the same time, the militant ideas and practices brought back from the war zone increase the security risks in the post-Soviet frozen zones and the need for Russia's

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[28]   M. Minakov, "Transnationalism of Un-Recognized Post-Soviet Nations: case of the Novorossia project", Unpublished paper presented at international conference "Ukraine's historical and contemporary interlockings: A transnational perspective on transformations", University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder), Germany, 5-6 November 2015.

involvement to quell the spread of militant separatism around the region.

Third, the Minsk process in 2016 shows the change in the Kremlin's approach to the DNR-LNR project. There are signs that Moscow is ready to support reintegration of DNR-LNR with Ukraine. The Minsk discussions on rules of local elections in eastern Donbass show that this readiness reached a practical level in April 2016.

These actions once again impact the situation in the non-recognized states. The recent discussions in the Abkhaz and Transnistrian press show that leaders of these countries feel insecure about their regimes. The government of South Ossetia declared its will to hold a referendum to join the Russian Federation. All these initiatives create additional pressure on Moscow to (a) assure that the Donbass reintegration would not harm the existence of independent un-recognized states, or (b) to ensure that the precedent of Crimean annexation would be repeated if *de facto* nations vote for it in their referenda.

Russia's Ukrainian policy has considerably stressed the invisible order in the network of post-Soviet *de facto* states. Today the Russian government would need to pay much more attention and allocate much more resources to keep order in its satellite states.

Conclusions: problematic perspectives for the post-Soviet space

The arguments above prove that none of the post-Soviet nations can exist the way they did before the annexation of Crimea and the Donbass War. All the big and small political players in the post-Soviet region started adapting to the growing insecurity resulting from Russia's Ukrainian policy and other geopolitical players' reactions to it.

The Ukrainian political system has developed institutions that limit or prevent the effectiveness of Russia's Ukraine policy. At the same time, the system has created elements that will reproduce hostility between the two neighboring countries in the short and

medium terms.

The cases of Kazakhstan and Belarus show that even the closest allies of Russia develop mechanisms decreasing cooperation and integration among members of the Eurasian Union.

The network of *de facto* states survived a shock and may initiate processes of either un-freezing the local conflicts, or of pursuing Crimean annexation precedents that would put Moscow under additional pressure from the international community and the populations of unrecognized states.

Russia's Ukraine policy has caused a snowball effect, proliferating to the point that requires Moscow to deeply review its approaches to dealing with its concerned neighbors. There is a growing need to restore the international legal order based on the Helsinki Agreements and Budapest Memorandum in Eastern Europe and Western Eurasia.