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Five Years of Ukrainian Crisis: Understanding Russia

П'ять років української кризи

Вероніка Кириленко і Райан Шіно в статті розглядають питання про створення самопроголошених ДНР і ЛНР в південно-східній частині України. Ці території все більше перетворюються на справжні російські протекторати. Оскільки військове постачання з Росії продовжує надходити в Україну, Москві все складніше заперечувати той факт, що вона надає зброю повстанцям. Численні джерела стверджують, що російська підтримка повстанців «збільшилася в два рази» з того моменту, коли Україна і Росія уклали попередню угоду про припинення вогню. В результаті цього тліючого конфлікту вже загинули 8 тисяч осіб, а 2,4 мільйона жителів України змушені були покинути свої будинки. Після п'яти років конфлікту 3,4 мільйона людей на Україні страждають від наслідків гуманітарної кризи, вони терміново потребують допомоги і захисту, зазначають автори статті.

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Five years ago, a fictional nation state called "Novorossiya" was envisioned by Russian president Vladimir Putin's advisers for the southeastern parts of Ukraine. It exists as a paradox within the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk that border Russia. This entity is now making Ukraine into a country containing a prolonged military conflict in the geographical hub of Europe. This simmering conflict has caused 8,000 deaths and forced 2.4 million people from their homes. After five years of conflict, 3.4 million people in Ukraine are struggling to cope with the impact of the humanitarian crisis and urgently require assistance and protection. Every day, the conflict forces millions of civilians to make impossible choices as to whether they eat, they have medicine, or their children go to school. Critical civilian infrastructure is severely impacted as ceasefire agreements are consistently disregarded.

It comes as no surprise that the Western media calls Russia a root cause of the problem and blames it all on "Russian aggression" against the peaceful and democratic Ukraine. But this is only partially true, and it represents only the Ukrainian interpretation of the situation, since Russia-phobic discourse has become trendy – since the "Russians stole the elections," of course.

Any rational attempt to comprehend the Russian motivation in the eyes of the media seems to constitute treason. At the same time, lack of objectivity with regard to the Russian side of the story keeps accelerating the Ukrainian crisis, which directly affects European security and stability, as well as the United States' and Russia's relations.

The first point completely missing from the Western narrative is that both the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) were established as a reaction to the coup d'état in Kyiv, when the pro-Russian government of then-president Viktor Yanukovich was overthrown during the November 2013 to February 2014 massive demonstrations in Ukraine, or so-called Euromaidan. This event was widely supported by the Obama administration, the "hawks" in Congress, and top European leaders.

Simultaneously, the protests were supported and, at some point, hijacked by the neo-fascist group "Right Sector," infamous for its anti-Russian and anti-Semitic ideology and practices that terrorized ordinary Ukrainians. This significant but rather inconvenient truth was either ignored or completely underreported by the mainstream media.

Immense dissatisfaction with the violent methods and anti-democratic inclinations of Euromaidan that brought to power infamous corrupted oligarchs led to counter-protests across Ukraine, primarily in the southeastern regions. The participants of the rallies were labeled as "Russian agents of influence" and were imprisoned or simply "disappeared."

While viewing Ukraine as one of the last strongholds for its imperial ambitions, Russia promised that the Russian military would be backing Russian Ukrainians who were a part of the "Russian world." Indeed, Novorossiia has received significant material, financial, political, and military support from Russia since its inception. Its territories have increasingly emerged as effective Russian protectorates by having their local economies gradually integrated with Russia.

Just as Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko has become increasingly reliant on Western military and financial support, Novorossiia is undoubtedly Moscow's newest puppet, which makes Ukraine a challenging topic for U.S.-Russia relations. Although a 2015 peace deal called for local elections in Donetsk and Luhansk, the critics, including the Ukrainian government and the European Union (E.U.), insisted that any voting in the regions was illegitimate because it was conducted in areas that were no longer under the control of the Ukrainian government.

Rebel leaders have similarly rejected Western criticism, arguing that Ukraine has failed to fulfill its commitments under the terms of the 2015 peace deal, notably the granting of increased autonomy to the rebel regions. In November 2018, both the DPR and the LPR held elections for regional assemblies and their respective heads. The results of the elections were strongly in favor of the separatist leaders in eastern Ukraine.

As Russian military supplies continue to enter Ukraine, it becomes harder by the day for Russia to deny that it is providing arms to the rebels. Multiple sources have stated that Russian support to the rebels has "doubled" since Ukraine and Russia reached a tentative ceasefire. Russian support for Novorossiia includes artillery, surveillance drones, and armored vehicles that would otherwise be nearly impossible for the rebels to obtain.

The rationale for this is the seemingly long forgotten perspective that Russia has often stated that it would not accept the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into the former Soviet Union. The Baltic nations seem to be exempt from this due to the agreements made between NATO and Russia regarding Kaliningrad. Although this resulted in part of the Russian territory becoming geographically separated from its contiguous motherland, it allowed for Russia to maintain and use the Russian Navy's Baltic Fleet. This same rationale was used to justify the reacquisition of Crimea to ensure that the Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet's official primary headquarters and facilities, located in the city of Sevastopol, would remain there.

To understand the Russian perspective, it should be noted that should NATO have lost the Cold War, most likely, similar perspectives would exist if the Warsaw Pact were expanding and approaching former NATO countries. Therefore, when perceiving a geopolitical loss, Russia has been using an interesting tactic in the turbulent former Soviet Union: rather than completely invading a country, Russia intends to destabilize it enough so that it cannot fully advance into either the E.U. or NATO.

Usually, this threat came from the "colored revolutions" that occurred during the post-Soviet Union transition periods. The effect of the orchestrated "revolutions" that

brought to power pro-Western but often highly inefficient governments was that Russia would then seek to establish a new sphere of influence in close proximity to the aforementioned "revolution." This consistent series of balances and counter-balances ultimately results in increased regional tensions and undermines regional stability and prosperity.

There are indeed two sides to every story, and the security concerns stated by Russia are valid in their own right. For Russia may no longer be considered a superpower, but there is no doubt that Russia is a regional power with a significant power projection capability.

It might be beneficial for world leaders to think about an actual re-engagement approach with Russia and look at the rationale for the actions of their adversary. Every nation-state operates within its own self-interest, and Russia is no exception. Maybe it's time for the international community to "promote democracy" via the use of a persuasive soft power approach to international relations, typically involving the use of economic or cultural influence.

Despite the media's anti-Russian hysteria, President Donald Trump's administration's approach to considering Russia as a strategic partner may result in greater international security cooperation and regional stability.