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Ukraine: Time to cut a deal?¹

On 7 May 2014, after months of unrelenting economic, military and propaganda campaigns against his fraternal neighbour, Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin suddenly signalled what appeared to be a change in direction. He called on the ‘pro-Russian’ separatists in the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk to postpone their referendums on independence, and declared that the presidential elections scheduled by Kyiv for 25 May were a ‘step in the right direction’.

Earlier, on 28 April, Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu had claimed that the Russian forces deployed on the Ukraine border for months had returned to their bases, a claim Putin repeated on 7 May. As became clear in each case, no such withdrawals were observed by anyone able to do so, which seemed to suggest that any softening of the Kremlin’s line on Ukraine was an optical illusion.

Seemingly in defiance of Putin’s calls for a postponement, the separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk held their hastily scheduled ‘referenda’ on 11 May, with slightly farcical claims of huge turnouts and Soviet-style electoral margins in their favour. But their appeal for Moscow to annex them, as it had earlier annexed Crimea, elicited no response. Putin has since declared again his readiness to accept the results of the Ukrainian presidential poll and repeated his assurance that the troops on the Ukrainian border would be withdrawn; and this

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time there are indications that the troops may indeed be embarking on a drawback (though many of the units could be redeployed within a couple of days).

Despite the more conciliatory tone, Putin has continued to make ominous pronouncements, including renewed threats of another gas price war to force Ukraine to pay the abrupt increase Gazprom is demanding; claims that Ukraine is in the grip of a civil war; and the suggestion that his close friend Viktor Medvedchuk (Putin is godfather of one of Medvedchuk's children), the most pro-Kremlin politician in the Ukrainian political class, should become the mediator between the Kyiv Government and the 'rebels' in the eastern provinces. But to Western capitals, desperately eager to find a solution to the problem, any change of tone will be grasped as a sign that Putin is finally ready to 'de-escalate', and just needs an 'off-ramp' to do so.

Though tactically flexible under pressure, Putin is not given to backward steps, much less sudden about-turns. In the matter of Ukraine, he has shown a particular determination to prevail from well before the military operation against Crimea. So what are we to make of Putin's unexpected amiability? What brought it about, how genuine is it, and how long will it last? Have his objectives changed, or is this merely a tactical shift?

The recent heavy media coverage of the Ukrainian issue has probably made its fundamental grammar and vocabulary more familiar to the general reader. But, to judge by commonly recurring omissions and misconceptions in public discussions, some salient facts are worth recalling.

While Russians and Ukrainians are ethnically, linguistically, religiously and culturally close, there are important differences between them that have only been partly flattened out by tsarist and Soviet conditioning. And those differences are apparent within Ukraine itself. For historical reasons, central and western Ukraine have come under the influence over centuries of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Poland. A substantial minority concentrated in the west are Uniate Catholics by belief or tradition, whose homelands had never formed part of Russia before the end of World War II. Though Orthodoxy is the religion, at least nominally, of the overwhelming majority, there is an important difference between the followers of the

Moscow and Kyiv patriarchates of the Orthodox Church. Moscow and its Ukrainian loyalists have always favoured the Moscow Patriarchate, but the more nationalist Kyiv Patriarchate may actually have a larger following within Ukraine – and their relationship is troubled. There is also a much smaller Autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Moscow rulers have often sought to suppress Ukrainian language and culture. The Soviet leadership in its early years was more liberal in such matters but, for much of its subsequent history, it was also very oppressive. Even since Ukraine became an independent state, Russia has refused to tolerate more than the most minimal cultural facilities for the millions of Ukrainians living in Russia. In Moscow-ruled Ukraine, by contrast, Russians enjoyed a privileged status and the use of Ukrainian was informally or formally tabooed. Independent Ukraine has taken modest steps to improve the relative position of Ukrainian within the state, which has angered some Russian speakers.

But the use of Russian is under no serious threat, and repeated suggestions in the media that the government that emerged after the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) protests wants to ban Russian are misinformed. The bill in question, though politically foolish given its timing, was aimed not at ‘banning’ Russian, an impossible objective, but, rather, at restoring greater official status to Ukrainian in an attempt to partially rebalance the wrongs of the past. It was, anyway, very quickly vetoed by provisional president Oleksandr Turchynov and withdrawn.

The Soviet period was a series of demographic disasters for most of the country. But it was worst of all for the ‘bloodlands’² of Ukrainian, Belarusian, Baltic and Polish settlement. Per capita, Jews, but also Ukrainians and Belarusians, suffered far more than Russians. Slips of the mind equating Soviet citizens with ‘Russians’ and loose references to 25 or 30 million Russian dead in World War II serve to erase a universe of suffering sustained in the west of the country, in which Stalin’s regime was complicit as a perpetrator. Similarly, in the 1930s, Ukrainians were among those national groups, together with Jews and Poles, who suffered disproportionately in the purges.

2 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

The early Bolshevik leadership encouraged strong development of the languages and culture of the national minorities, to win their loyalty and ensure victory over the Whites in the civil war of 1917–22. The Ukrainian communist leadership of the 1920s was active in pursuit of nationalist Ukrainian objectives. From the late 1920s, however, Stalin brutally reversed this policy to favour Russian, and the emergent generation of Ukrainian national communist leaders and cultural activists was decapitated.

Worst of all, in the process of brutally collectivising agriculture in Ukraine (which had been the breadbasket of the empire), and then extracting grain from it for export, Stalin inflicted terrible casualties. The culmination was the artificial famine of 1932–33, which led to mass starvation and innumerable acts of cruelty aimed at preventing the victims from securing any relief. Historians debate both the numbers of dead and the Kremlin's precise intent in manufacturing this holocaust (known in Ukrainian as *holodomor*), but whether it was genocide by some definition or not, at least 3 million Ukrainians perished (and some estimates go much higher).

The Soviet regime suppressed discussion of these monstrous events and succeeded in largely obliterating them not only from the public domain but also, to a considerable degree, from popular awareness. The Russians who were encouraged to migrate into depopulated parts of Ukraine have even less awareness of the past. Through discreet and, indeed, politically hazardous family communication, Ukrainians have retained at least a fragmented folk memory of the great famine, which naturally doesn't always dispose them positively to Moscow. For its part, the Putin regime greatly resented pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko's attempts to restore a basic historical understanding among Ukrainian citizens of the *holodomor*, which was at odds with Putin's policy of progressively rehabilitating Stalin and his works. When Viktor Yanukovych succeeded Yushchenko in 2010, he moved quickly to de-emphasise the issue and defang it of any anti-Russian accents, a difficult exercise in the circumstances.

Until recently, despite the burden of history, Ukrainians and Russians have continued to get on reasonably well with one another in Ukraine. Ukrainians living side by side with Russians in other parts of the post-Soviet sphere mingle easily, intermarry with Russians, and often adopt Russian ethnicity and the Russian language. The same has been

largely true of Ukraine itself. It was not the case, Kremlin propaganda notwithstanding, that ethnic Russians faced any threats of persecution from Ukrainian fellow citizens in the east of Ukraine before the invasion of Crimea. At most they might experience irritation at the public use of what they regarded as an inferior but basically comprehensible rustic dialect in public places or on street signs.

The main resentments of Russians in eastern Ukraine centred on the fact that the central government in Kyiv, controlled by the Donetsk-based Yanukovych clan, had done nothing to improve their standard of living, rather the reverse. Meanwhile, as they were keenly aware, he and his notorious *familia* were dipping into the public trough right up to their armpits. Because of the cultural and historical differences between the east and west of the country, some political polarisation also existed, reflected in differing regional levels of support for the main political parties.

But the differences were less than virulent and, in the 20-odd years since independence, they were successfully managed by elections that tended to produce regular alternation between eastern-oriented and western-oriented presidents. Eastern Ukrainians were mostly unenthusiastic about the pro-Western Orange Revolution of 2004–05 and the Maidan protests of 2013–14, though a substantial minority in the east, including Russians and Russian-speakers, supported them as movements that might improve their standards of living and increase probity in public life.

In fact, there was a degree of structural pluralism in Ukrainian society, which contributed to the retention of more democratic freedoms in the country than in neighbouring Russia or Belarus, for example. In that sense, Ukraine was a more democratic polity than any other part of the former Soviet Union, apart from the Baltic states and Georgia, and remains so, despite the current artificially induced turbulence.

But, if it is a little more democratic than the others, it is certainly not more economically functional than they are. Russia, with its huge resource endowment, has done better than Ukraine economically, and so too have Belarus (with its huge Russian subsidies) and Kazakhstan, for example. For many Ukrainians, however, the most telling comparison was with its western neighbour Poland, which was on the same level as Ukraine in 1990 but has since leapt far ahead, particularly after

it joined the European Union in 2004. Its per capita GDP is now over three times the size of Ukraine's, and with Russia's ongoing military and economic aggression against Ukraine, that disparity is increasing sharply.³ The numerous Ukrainians who travel to Poland in search of short-term work can see and feel the difference and want to follow Poland's example.

The European Union, therefore, had strong appeal in Ukraine, reinforcing the Western orientation of those already so inclined but also attracting many others. The idea of seeking some degree of economic integration with Europe came to enjoy significant support both in the population as a whole (though only a minority in the east), and in the political and other elites. As a result, Ukrainian leaders mostly tried to couple good relations with Russia with some degree of *rapprochement* with Europe. Recent opinion polling has regularly shown a strong plurality in the country favouring an Association Agreement (AA), with Brussels, well ahead of the numbers supporting Putin's geopolitically motivated Eurasian Customs Union.

Yanukovich disappointed some of his eastern followers by working towards an AA, and Russian propaganda was able to effectively capitalise on the issue. Russian TV, heavily favoured by Russians in the eastern provinces, pushed the line that the AA would be the road to ruin for those provinces whose trade was directed more towards the Russian market. Moscow repeatedly threatened to penalise Ukraine's trade with Russia in retaliation for Kyiv's concluding any deal with Brussels. And, in 2013, not for the first time, it did indeed conduct a trade war against Ukraine, closing off its border to Ukrainian exports for more than a week in summer, and selecting as one of its key targets the chocolates produced by Roshen, the large confectionery concern owned by the 'Chocolate King' (and, since 25 May, the Ukrainian President), Petro Poroshenko, whose TV station was strongly advocating adoption of the Western vector.

Kyiv's negotiations with Brussels were undoubtedly a blow to Putin's hope of restoring a Soviet Union-lite, dominated by Moscow. Once he realised that there was a serious danger that the AA might happen,

3 See Simon Tilford, 'Poland and Ukraine: A tale of two economies', Centre for European Reform, 31 Mar. 2014, www.cer.org.uk/publications/archive/bulletin-article/2014/poland-and-ukraine-tale-two-economies.

his hostility became explicit. Some Western observers, lobbyists and officials – of the kind widespread in Germany, where they are known as *Russlandversteher* (those who understand Russia) – suggest that the European Union should have conciliated Russia by involving it closely in the tortuous negotiations that took place with Kyiv over the AA. This would, they argued, have reassured Russia and dealt with any objections it might have had.

Unlike Putin's negotiations with Kyiv, however, the European Union's dealings with Ukraine were largely transparent, and conducted according to well-enunciated principles. There was no compelling reason to suppose that increased trade with Europe would make Ukraine a worse partner for Russia. Poland, for example, greatly increased its trade with Russia after joining the European Union and, in general, developed better relations with Moscow.

The reason why Moscow did not like the idea of Ukraine joining was that it wanted Kyiv to remain a subordinate partner contributing to Moscow's geopolitical objectives and responding cooperatively to its decisions and initiatives. Any attempt to involve Moscow in the negotiations would have been abortive, leading swiftly to a Russian demand for a de facto right of veto on anything that might ever be agreed. Putin's attitude to this has been eloquently expressed by the measures he took against Ukraine once it did attempt to fly the coop.

Eastern Ukrainians, anxious about their economic prospects, had good reason to fear EU integration. But, the real danger to them was that, as they had been warned, Moscow would launch punitive countermeasures to any Ukrainian decision for EU integration, based not on economic but on geopolitical considerations. They could sense that failing to accept the offer that couldn't be refused would lead to trouble first and foremost for their rust-belt industries. Not surprisingly, a majority of respondents in the eastern provinces regularly told opinion pollsters that they favoured Moscow's Customs Union, not the AA with Brussels. This gave Moscow valuable material to work with.

It was never the case, however, that the Russians and Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine wanted to become part of Russia. Opinion polling over the years has shown that a great majority of eastern Ukrainians – including many who speak Russian by preference or, indeed, identify

themselves as Russians – want their region to remain part of Ukraine. There is a regional national identity, as well as an ethnic one. And even in Crimea, up to the invasion, a majority of the inhabitants declared to opinion pollsters that they wished to remain in Ukraine. Despite this, the phoney referendum that the new post-invasion bosses conducted showed an implausible turnout with a huge majority supporting annexation.

Western commentators are used to spin in their own political systems and are growing increasingly fed up with it. They are not, however, used to dealing with what the Russians call *vranyo* (roughly, lies of a particularly brazen and shameless kind). *Vranyo* was one of the basic pillars of the Soviet regime, and it continues to play a major and indeed an increasing role in the Putinist system. When someone reports electoral results affected by *vranyo* to Western listeners, however, they are inclined to assume that those results must be somewhere near the mark, spun a bit, perhaps, but otherwise okay, and certainly indicative of something. In this case they were wrong, yet we all heard and read phrases in our media implicitly accepting that the results of the fraudulent referenda had some meaning. They did of course have a meaning, but it was not as a test of public opinion.

Events since the invasion and annexation of Crimea, up to and including Putin's recent shift of tack, need to be considered in the light of the above. Western reporting and comment have sometimes fallen victim to their practitioners' sincerely held principles – the belief, for example, that the truth must be somewhere in the middle, or that the object of widespread criticism, in this case Russia, is some kind of underdog, so let's try to understand it. Russians are talented people and one of their traditional strengths, in which they are again excelling, is propaganda. They have run a crudely mendacious but effective and skilfully differentiated information war against Ukraine and its Western supporters over the past few months, which has done a great deal to reduce the international fallout from their seizure of Crimea and destabilisation of Ukraine's eastern provinces.

How, then, do recent events in and around Ukraine look if they're summarised with considerably less *vranyo*? Russia's conquest of Crimea was indeed a masterly operation displaying a great deal of ingenuity and originality, and making adroit use of some historical precedents. Following up its trade war skirmishes, but with assurances that it had

no aggressive intentions, Moscow conducted very large military exercises in the west of Russia near the Ukrainian border, deploying up to 150,000 troops. These provided cover for the preparation of a detailed invasion plan for Crimea, which was then implemented with considerable strategic surprise. The invasion saw deployed a modest number of highly trained Russian *spetsnaz* (special forces) and military units based in Crimea in accordance with, but now grossly violating the terms of, the Black Sea Fleet Agreement with Kyiv. Putin initially denied that any Russian forces were involved, but later, after the triumph, acknowledged that there had been.

The weak and somewhat demoralised Ukrainian forces on the peninsula, like the new Kyiv Government, were taken unawares. Any serious response was beyond their immediate capacity and, in any case, they feared that any armed resistance they attempted would provoke Moscow to stage a wider incursion using the massed forces just beyond the border. The invading forces wore masks and no military insignia (another of many breaches of international law) and liaised closely not just with other Russian units, but also with local militias and politicians who had clearly, under cover of the heavy Russian presence on the peninsula, been thoroughly prepared to perform their roles.

One of Yanukovych's first acts in 2010 had been to extend the Russian fleet's tenure in Crimea and resume the traditional military and security cooperation with Russia that his pro-Western predecessor Yushchenko had been trying to minimise. Moscow used the cooperation of the Yanukovych years to good effect. Sergey Aksyonov, a marginal Crimean politician with 4 per cent support, Kremlin links, a criminal record (like Yanukovych), and money and connections to lend to the task, was parachuted into the role of 'premier' of the new entity. His 'government' then proclaimed its desire to join Russia and conducted a rushed and fraudulent 'referendum', which produced an allegedly large turnout and huge majority ratifying this new reality. Monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and other Western observers were bullied, harassed and excluded, though exceptions were made for some Kremlin-friendly right-wing and left-wing European extremist groups to observe and enthuse about the referendum.

After hinting first that he would not quickly accede to the Aksyonov government's request, Putin then abruptly staged a huge annexation ceremony in the Kremlin to mark this momentous development. There, he made a stirring patriotic speech reaffirming the new Russian doctrine that any people anywhere who spoke Russian would be regarded by Moscow as people it had a responsibility to regard as its own citizens and to protect against any harm that might come their way. This doctrine is one of the key items that induced a wide variety of Western observers, including Hillary Clinton and the Prince of Wales, to comment on the parallels with Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. The entire Crimean operation was accomplished within no more than three weeks.

Western experts had made critical appraisals of Russia's military performance in their crushing of Georgia in 2008. This time, however, after getting over their initial surprise, they acknowledged that, technically, the takeover of Crimea was a classy performance, and one that indicated that Putin's big military buildup – to which EU and NATO countries have totally failed to respond – is yielding impressive results.

Indeed, Western countries appeared to be as much taken by surprise as the Ukrainians themselves. They spoke of costs and consequences for Russia, but were unable to agree on imposing any severe enough to worry Putin greatly. While Western countries have said that they would never recognise the annexation as legal, there is a strong sense that most of the Europeans, at least, have accepted it as a fait accompli. There seems to be an unstated but widespread assent to Putin's argument that Nikita Khrushchev's decision to allocate Crimea to Ukraine was a silly misunderstanding that should be put aside. Crimea is Russian, end of story.

It should be emphasised again that reputable opinion polls showed that, right up to the invasion and despite the fact that some 58 per cent of Crimeans identified themselves as Russians, there was not a majority that favoured Crimea's joining Russia. The Crimean Tatars (some 12 per cent of the population), who had been deported by Stalin towards the end of World War II with huge casualties, were particularly emphatic in their opposition. After making one or two conciliatory gestures in their direction, the Kremlin seemed to abandon the attempt and resumed their policy of persecution. Many thousands of Crimean

Tatars have now chosen exile in central and western Ukraine. Their leader, Mustafa Dzhemilev, has been banned from entering 'Russia', and their main political organ has been threatened with closure as an 'extremist organisation'.

These events recall much that was done in the Stalinist era by way of territorial acquisition and the erection of totalitarian structures. The human casualties, it should be noted, have been much fewer; although it was carried out by highly armed and menacing troops, the Crimean operation was not gratuitously violent. But the parallels with the 1940s are nonetheless striking.

Meanwhile, Moscow and its fifth column in Ukraine have continued their work destabilising the provinces of eastern Ukraine where pro-Russian sentiment is strongest. At first glance, the *modus operandi* mirrored the Crimean operation: heavily armed men in anonymous military fatigues with full face masks and no insignia; strong evidence of a controlling Russian presence; and detachments of local sympathisers helping out, including civilian and *babushka* groups to provide a human shield for the operations and a local legitimisation.

Again there was a high degree of coordination between assaults on public buildings of strategic importance in various major eastern centres, as the violence 'spread' to different targeted cities, which formed a neat and strategic band running through eastern Ukraine down to the Black Sea. As Putin and others spoke ominously of Novorossiia (the tsarist name for most of eastern and southern Ukraine), attempts were made to extend the insurgency into the Black Sea provinces stretching across the south of Ukraine.

Armed groups of militiamen and toughs roamed the towns looking for useful work for themselves. They particularly concentrated their violence and intimidation on locals who spoke Ukrainian, flew Ukrainian flags or took part in pro-Maidan demonstrations. They were helped in their activities by the passivity or even collusion of the police and security forces in the east, which had become wholly dominated in recent years by Yanukovich's Party of Regions machine, and appeared to be happy for the pro-Russian militias to take over control of the region. The object of all this activity seemed to be to weaken resistance to the new order that was about to be instituted, as in Crimea.

But differences between the two campaigns became more apparent as time went on. Some targeted cities were effective in resisting, even where there seemed to be a strong pro-Russian element in the population. Recovering from their initial shock, the Kyiv authorities began to resist with armed force, using such loyal military and security units as they could muster to take the fight back to that new and suddenly very well-armed ethnic category, the 'pro-Russians' in the east. Casualties began to mount. Local residents sometimes became angry with the militiamen who were undermining their way of life and behaving in an increasingly lawless way.

Key oligarchs, who had mostly been playing a waiting game or even colluding with the troublemakers, joined the resistance. Some of them, who had been recruited as local governors by Kyiv, used their economic power against the separatists. When Ukraine's richest man, Rinat Akhmetov, who had initially been virtually invisible, suddenly deployed some of his vast workforce to challenge the thugs and police the streets instead of them, there was a sense that the tide was turning.

The morale and discipline of the attackers slackened and they increasingly involved themselves in common criminal activity, which was often directed against minority groups, especially Roma. As with Yanukovich's crowd-dispersal operations on the Maidan, groups of *titushki* (hired thugs) appeared to be involved in the action, with some of them admitting that they were being paid to inflict violence on pro-Kyiv Ukrainians. Media reporting began to focus on the criminal element in the east, as did the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission, whose second report⁴ on the situation laid the burden of responsibility heavily on the pro-Russian camp for the killings, abductions, beatings and harassment that they were observing.

Clearly, if Putin's intention had been to overrun some of the eastern provinces as a preliminary to annexation, things were no longer running smoothly. Destabilisation was relatively easy; pacifying and then holding new territories in the east would be more difficult, even in Yanukovich's home territory of Donetsk and Luhansk, where the 'pro-Russians' were much stronger than elsewhere. It needs to be emphasised again that, while there are more Russians and more

4 UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission Report, 15 May 2014, www.un.org.ua/images/stories/Report_15_May_2014_en.pdf.

pro-Russian sentiment in the eastern provinces, before the Russian intervention, strong majorities there, including in Donetsk and Luhansk, favoured remaining part of Ukraine.

This was no doubt one of the reasons why Putin reacted as he did when the Donetsk and Luhansk leaders organised referendums and declared themselves sovereign 'people's republics' (another bizarrely nostalgic formulation from the Stalinist past). He decided first to advocate that the votes be abandoned, and then to decline their request to be annexed. As well as distancing himself from his own agents and their zealot followers, he began to reach out to what looked increasingly likely to be a new leadership group in Kyiv after the presidential elections on 25 May. While the sanctions to date had not seemingly made a huge impression on him, he was painfully aware that the Russian economy, stagnant already for some time, was heading into recession, and the possibility of more resolute sanctions being imposed, as had been threatened if he tried to disrupt those elections, was a serious potential danger.

As it became increasingly evident that the new president, with a huge and convincing majority, would be Poroshenko, maintaining the fiction that Yanukovych was still the legitimate leader was becoming more difficult. Putin has recently repeated the claim that Yanukovych was still the rightful leader, but he has also said several times that he is prepared to engage with Poroshenko. He may well see in Poroshenko an opportunity as well as a challenge.

Poroshenko has emphasised his pro-Maidan credentials recently and declared his full commitment to European integration and the recovery of Crimea. But he is an oligarch who has become a billionaire mainly through his Russian trade links and investments and has, in the past, been associated with Yanukovych and his Party of Regions, as well as with more pro-Western political formations. He mingles easily with Russians, has a Russian daughter-in-law and has emphasised his readiness to negotiate with Moscow – and with Putin personally, of whom he has spoken publicly with diplomatic respect. In a word, Putin may have felt that Poroshenko is more his kind of Ukrainian than any of the other post-Yanukovych leaders, like Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk or the former provisional president, Turchynov.

If so, he may be heading for something of a disappointment. Poroshenko is a tough and experienced politician with a huge majority behind him, including wins in the eastern provinces. And he has begun his administration forcefully. Responding to a heavily armed ambush on a Ukrainian army checkpoint south of Donetsk, where the well-trained raiders' objective was clearly to kill as many as possible (16 died and many more were injured), and the armed seizure of Donetsk airport several days later, Poroshenko ordered a major armed assault to recapture the airport, resulting in the deaths of nearly 50 separatists. And he repeated that he did not regard EU integration and Crimea as negotiable.

Russia's sustained coercive pressure on Ukraine – the manipulative gas pricing, the trade boycotts, the collusion with pro-Russian elements in Ukraine, the seizure of Crimea, and the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine – all look like neo-imperial aggression. And it is neo-imperial aggression by a country with a very bad record in that respect. At a time when other European imperial powers have long since withdrawn from their imperial possessions, whether in Europe or beyond it, such behaviour seems anachronistic as well as unconscionable. Hence Obama's lectures about Russia being on the wrong side of history – not terribly effective as a way of influencing Moscow's behaviour, but an understandable sentiment.

The Ukrainians have been invaded and had a vicious civil war artificially inseminated in their eastern provinces. Notwithstanding a surprising flow of Western commentary in their defence, the Russians are in breach of numerous international instruments, including the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, whereby Ukraine agreed to divest itself of its nuclear weapons in exchange for assurances offered to it by the United States, Britain, Russia and, later, France that it would not be subjected to any military or economic coercion by anyone. Yet it has been subjected to both many times.

Can that do anything positive for the international nuclear non-proliferation regime? And what does this portend for other countries with large Russian imperial minorities? What of Moldova, Kazakhstan or Belarus's surviving sovereignty? And what, even, of NATO members like Estonia (already in 2007 subjected to a cyberwar backed

up by organised turbulence within its Russian minority) and Latvia (many of whose ethnic Russian citizens have told opinion pollsters that they support Russia's invasion of Crimea)?

Yet Russia's view of the whole saga, especially the last few months of it, has been taken up by numerous Western commentators who are eager to set out what they obviously believe to be the deeper reality behind the seemingly blindingly obvious: that Russia's behaviour is aggressive and unjustifiable, and must be restrained. There are some who blame the victim, pointing to the poor management of successive Ukrainian governments and suggesting that they are so irredeemably incompetent and corrupt that nothing better can ever be expected from them. In any case they are in Russia's sphere of influence, so let them beg Moscow for mercy.

Another school of thought sees this as yet another case for which the United States must take the blame, with its endless malevolent interference in other people's affairs. It failed to give the new Russian democracy of the early 1990s any support and brazenly expanded NATO practically up to Moscow's door. Any Russian leader would have reacted badly to that, justifiably fearing that Washington was trying to destroy it. Some of these thinkers seem to be guided by the principle that wherever the United States takes a stand, the decent or insightful should position themselves on the other side.

Then there are the economists who argue that Russia has given its neighbours generous discounts, which, in Ukraine's case, have been frittered away. Saving Ukraine from itself would be ruinously expensive for the West, so it's fortunate that Russia wants to take it over. If we agree to their doing so, we will save ourselves billions of dollars, and how good is that? This line of thought is a subset of the blame-the-victim thinkers, and it shares their lack of interest in any possible security downsides of a Russian takeover.

Yet another prominent group is made up of what might be termed the perpetual friends of Russia. Often these are durable lefties who've retained a sympathy for Russia through all the purges, Hungaries, Czech Springs, Cubas, North Koreas and Venezuelas, all the way to the collapse of communism and beyond, and who still see Russia as a country to be protected from its enemies. Sometimes to be found on the pages of *The Guardian* or *The Nation*, they are typically a subset

of the blame-the-Americans school, despite Washington currently having its most liberal administration since at least Jimmy Carter's, and possibly beyond.

Let us not forget the realists, who also see what Putin has done as what any Russian leader would have done. For them, there's no point in being indignant; nature has taken its course and resistance would at best be futile, or at worst be dangerous folly. Despite their 'realism', these thinkers are strangely insouciant about the strategic downsides of Russia being thus encouraged to make further land-grabs from other of its neighbours, till it finally reaches the next circumference of hostile encircling states which will also need to be dealt with. The explanation for this paradox is probably that the morbid realists haven't, for one reason or another, any affection for the current victims of the bear (a furry image they like to deploy to make Russian aggression seem more cuddly). If we give some of them to the Russians, the bear will be sated and we'll all be able to enjoy some realistic peace in our time.

Both of the preceding two categories overlap with the left, particularly of course the friends of Russia, and sometimes the hard left. They are often particularly susceptible to the Kremlin propaganda line, which has stated from the outset of its aggression that Ukraine is mortally threatened by vicious Ukrainian anti-Semites and neo-Nazis. This line has actually been running since Moscow took over much of Eastern Europe at the end of World War II, and still earns the Kremlin handsome rewards. People with a weak understanding of recent Ukrainian developments (and Russian for that matter) are particularly susceptible to it.

It is not a matter of debate that Ukraine, like many other European countries, has seen in the past a great deal of anti-Semitism, some of it violent and nasty. And it is true that the Svoboda party and other smaller groups in the Maidan coalition were not free of it. But it was a weak component, given great prominence mainly by the fact that, as Yanukovich increasingly resorted to violence, the hard men in the opposition who were prepared to use physical violence gained greater prominence. But the issue was grossly overestimated in some instant Western commentary, while there was an equivalent underestimation of the presence of similar forces in the east. In fact, Jews were strongly

represented in the Maidan coalition, and senior rabbis have repeatedly emphasised that they did not feel seriously threatened in Ukraine either east or west.

Given Ukraine's history, the amount of anti-Semitism, as opposed to militant nationalism (not the same thing, and not necessarily always 'far right'), is at present modest. And, as for the political representation of such forces in the country, the best measure is provided by the European parliamentary elections on 22–25 May: in France, Denmark and Austria, the far right got 20 per cent or more of the vote; in Ukraine it received only 2.2 per cent, despite the fact that Russia's actions were the ideal catalyst for more of it to have developed.

Finally, in this incomplete list of *Russlandversteher*, we have the hard-right extremists. Recently the director of Sydney's Lowy Institute, Michael Fullilove, deplored the relative absence of the left from the ranks of those deeply concerned about the events in Ukraine. He made a good point, and could perhaps with due qualifications have extended it beyond Australia, which was his primary concern. But some excellent pieces have also appeared in left-wing publications.⁵

It is the hard right's enthusiasm for Putin and all his works, however, that is perhaps even more dismaying, particularly in the light of their stellar performance in the elections to the European Parliament. While Putin has many Soviet characteristics, he has increasingly been selling himself and his regime as exemplars of traditional 'conservative' values, while continuing to clutch the gullible old left to his bosom.

Putin's conservative values include suppressing democracy, empowering the reactionary and KGB-subservient Russian Orthodox hierarchy, encouraging people calling themselves Cossacks to undertake bully-boy roles in public (including whipping Pussy Riot performers), denouncing and oppressing gays, and pursuing territorial aggrandisement. The European hard right reciprocates warmly. Marine Le Pen, for example, has twice visited Moscow recently and seemed to get on famously with the relentlessly aggressive nationalist with KGB connections, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin. Representatives from such parties were invited to observe the Crimean referendum to

5 See, for example, Brendan Simms, 'Defend the West: Is it time to re-arm?', *New Statesman*, 3 Apr. 2014, www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/03/defend-west.

attest to its strict conformity with best democratic practice, a function that they performed enthusiastically. I was always taught that hard left and hard right have more in common than either would wish to acknowledge. In this case, it would certainly seem so.

But Putin and his Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, are now sounding more reasonable. Is this a good thing? Well it's an improvement on Putin's annexation sabbath in the Kremlin. And perhaps some good will come of it. But only if Western leaders can show a little more resolution and unity than has been evident so far.

It has always seemed that Moscow's minimal demand, beyond seizing Crimea, is that Ukraine be constitutionally restructured to create a federal or even a confederal state in which the eastern provinces, and through them Moscow, would have an effective veto on major decisions, especially regarding the country's external orientation. Alternatively, perhaps, Moscow might wish to see immutable constitutional provisions directly inserted that would preclude Ukraine from seeking membership of NATO or the European Union or any equivalent international arrangement (an AA through the Eastern Partnership program, for example). Moscow also urges that the Russian language must have guaranteed status as a state language. It is evident, moreover, that it aspires to have these sorts of constitutional provisions guaranteed by some international instrument.

Finlandisation is also being proffered by generous Western cheerleaders, free with other people's favours, as the ideal solution for Ukraine, just at the time when Ukrainian events have led to another wave of anxious discussion in neutral Finland and Sweden as to whether their security arrangements are adequate for present circumstances. Ukraine's post-Yanukovich leadership has repeatedly indicated a readiness to discuss greater devolution of powers to the provinces, but within the bounds of a unitary state.

Federalisation of the kind that Moscow would like is not popular outside the separatist movements in eastern Ukraine. It's hard therefore to see it being accepted by any credible domestic democratic process in Ukraine. Just how Moscow would be able to get what it wants is therefore unclear. Presumably it would respond to its disappointment with the outcome of any domestic or international process in such matters in the usual way, by renewing its destabilisation of the

eastern provinces or by inflicting another gas war or heavy-handed trade boycott on Ukraine. Similarly, if Poroshenko proves to be less amenable to pressure than Moscow is hoping (he says he is going to divest himself of much of his business empire), it may think better of having agreed to engage with him in the first place. Russia has a wide range of punitive measures to draw on in any such contingency.

By their invasion and destabilisation campaigns, the Russians have in large measure discredited themselves with the Ukrainian mainstream, for the immediate future at least. If they can't annex part of eastern Ukraine, or secure special constitutional prerogatives for their proxies there, they will be facing a poor outlook. This leaves one with the suspicion that, if the current tone of sweet reason does not yield adequate rewards, some incident may occur or be devised that will overturn the chessboard and confront Kyiv with a renewal of outright violence or economic blackmail.

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