

# The Origins of Peace, Non-Violence, and Conflict in Ukraine

Written by Taras Kuzio

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TARAS KUZIO, APR 1 2015

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Crimea was annexed by Russia in March 2014, a month after the Euromaidan revolution led to President Viktor Yanukovich fleeing from Ukraine. This was followed by the launch of a separatist rebellion that targeted the eight Russophone oblasts of Eastern and Southern Ukraine. In September 2014, a tenuous ceasefire was negotiated after five months of intense fighting that claimed 5,000 civilians and as many as 10,000 Ukrainian military, separatists, and Russian soldiers dead, wounded, and missing. The very high number of combatant casualties reflects the viciousness and intensity of a relatively short war; in contrast, 600 soldiers and police officers were killed in Northern Ireland over a three-decade terrorist conflict. This is clearly not a terrorist conflict (despite Kiev's name given to its operations as ATO [Anti-Terrorist Operation]) but an insurgency; that is a conflict lying between a full-scale war and terrorism. As a result of the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the armed conflict in Ukrainian Donbas, over 921,000 people (as of 23 January 2015) have registered as internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Ukraine, and over 524,000 have sought asylum or other legal status in the Russian Federation (PACE, 2015). Nevertheless, eighty percent of Ukrainians believe Ukraine is at war with Russia, according to a December poll. International organisations and human rights bodies have systematically reported widespread human rights abuses by separatist and Russian nationalist groups, while Ukrainian forces have been criticized for indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas (Amnesty International, 2014; Council of Europe, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2014; United Nations, 2014).

This article seeks to understand why a bitter conflict took place in Ukraine after nearly two decades of peaceful inter-ethnic and inter-regional relations with a deepened partition following Russia's recognition of the 2 November 2014 'elections' in the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) and Donetsk People's Republics (DNR). In the 1990s and 2000s, Ukraine resolved the Crimean separatist challenge at the same time as frozen conflicts emerged in Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, and Russia fought two wars in Chechnya.

Ukraine's transition from a state at peace to being in conflict with the Donbas and Russia is an outgrowth of four factors: first, rise of authoritarian and neo-Soviet political forces (Party of Regions, United Russia); second, reaction to Western-supported popular protests (Bulldozer, Rose and Orange Revolutions, Euromaidan); third, strong opposition to NATO and EU enlargement; and fourth, rise of nationalism and revisionism in Russian foreign policy.

### **Rise of Authoritarian and Neo-Soviet Political Forces**

The Party of Regions and United Russia are united in their authoritarian, neo-Soviet, and populist-paternalistic operating culture. Both are difficult to classify using Western political science definitions because they unite

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oligarchs, attract former Communist Party voters, and uphold Soviet ideological tenets, such as state paternalism, anti-fascist discourse, and distrust of the West, particularly the US and NATO. The Party of Regions was allied to centrist parties during Leonid Kuchma's presidency (1994-2004) and therefore was routinely defined as 'centrist.' This, though, was misleading, as Eastern Ukrainian centrist parties had emerged from the Komsomol's (Communist Youth League) Democratic Platform within the Soviet Communist Party in the late 1980s and were seeking to build liberal parties targeting middle-class voters. The Party of Regions was very different, an ally of big business and indifferent or hostile to the middle class which twice led and financed rebellions against Yanukovich in the form of the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan.

At the same time, there are as many differences as there are similarities. United Russia is a typical Eurasian party of power that draws on senior former Soviet nomenklatura and security officials with their base in the country's central cities. The Party of Regions hails from the working-class and coalmining city of Donetsk (twinned with Britain's Sheffield) that never had influence in the central ruling organs of Soviet Ukraine, which was dominated by local elites from Kiev, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kharkiv. The Party of Regions is unique in the former Soviet space in being launched by a nexus of new oligarchs, old Soviet Red Directors, Pan-Slavic and regional activists, and organised crime figures (Kuzio, 2014a; Wilson, 2014, pp.126-128) that established a successful political machine that won four parliamentary and presidential elections in 2006-2012 (Kudelia and Kuzio, 2015). Mark Galeotti (2014) has pointed out that 'Crime, especially organised crime, has been at the heart of the events in Ukraine from the start,' and Russian and Ukrainian political leaders have a long record of collaboration with organised crime figures in the post-Soviet era (Dawisha, 2014, pp.15, 39, 62, 7983,144, 158; Kupchinsky, 2009).

Another difference is nationalist ideology, which has always been present in United Russia, but not in the Party of Regions – a typical Eastern Ukrainian ideologically amorphous political force. Yanukovich and Putin are both kleptocrats, but the latter is also committed to building Russia as a great power, while the former starved the Ukrainian military of resources, mishandled its military reform launched in 2007, and then permitted a foreign power (Russia) to exert influence over the leadership of the presidential guard, military, and Security Service (SBU).

Although both were successful political machines, only United Russia and Putin could sustain genuine popularity through widespread public backing for Russian great power nationalism and high energy prices for much of the 2000s that increased living standards. Yanukovich's popularity had slumped to the low 20s in polls conducted just ahead of the Euromaidan, and without massive election fraud, he could not have won re-election in 2015. Ukraine's regional diversity made it impossible for the Party of Regions to dominate the country to the same extent as United Russia does in the Russian Federation. Yanukovich's failure to understand that Ukraine is not Russia, as the 2004 book by Leonid Kuchma is titled, ultimately led to his loss of power.

The Party of Regions did have some ideological members who included supporters of pan-Slavic and Soviet nationalism and integrated ideologues, such as Oleksandr Bazyliuk (Congress of Russian Organisations of Ukraine, Civic Congress renamed as the Slavic Unity Party), Vadym Kolesnychenko (Human Rights Public Movement "Russian-speaking Ukraine"), and Dmytro Tabachnyk who was Education Minister in two Nikolai Azarov governments in 2010-2014 (Kryuchkov and Tabachnyk, 2008). They were members of Yanukovich's team that differentiated itself from Ukraine's earlier presidents in adopting Russia's position on the 1933 famine as a Soviet-wide tragedy (not genocide against Ukraine); emphasising the Great Patriotic War (not World War II); returning to Soviet denunciations of Ukrainian nationalism and Crimean Tatars as Nazi collaborators and 'fascists'; and distrust of the NATO, US, and the West in general. The Party of Regions, Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU), and Crimean Russian nationalists upheld Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's justification for the 1944 deportation of Crimean Tatars when half their number died, a historic event viewed as genocide by them. In May 2014, only three months after Russia's annexation of the Crimea, the local authorities banned the annual commemoration of the deportation and closed down the unofficial Mejlis Tatar parliament (Coynash, 2014b, c, d; Council of Europe, 2014).

The Party of Regions was willing to countenance an alliance with Crimean Russian nationalists and the KPU, a step that would have been unpalatable to Kuchma, who defeated both political forces in 1995 and 1999, respectively. Kuchma marginalised Crimean Russian nationalists whilst the Party of Regions revived them after it cemented an alliance with United Russia in 2005, and a year later, Russian political technologist Konstantin Zatulin brokered an

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election alliance of the Party of Regions and Russian nationalists that won a majority in the Crimean parliament. In the 2014 Crimean parliamentary and local elections, many former Party of Regions deputies were elected by United Russia that won a majority of seats. In 2008, the Party of Regions, KPU, and Crimean Russian nationalists were the only political forces in the Commonwealth of Independent States (outside Russia and frozen conflict enclaves) who supported the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia breaking a long-standing consensus among Ukrainian elites in support of the territorial integrity of states. Yanukovich echoed Putin when he justified their support by referring to the independence of Kosovo and 'double standards.'

The Party of Regions was characterised by its willingness to use violence to achieve their goals. The party drew on sportsmen vigilantes for corporate raiding, election fraud, and violent attacks on civil society activists, journalists, and members of the political opposition (Kuzio, 2010a; Wilson, 2014; pp.49, 78-79; Zimmer, 2005). Yanukovich, with a twice-criminal record, is from Donetsk which, together with the Crimea and Odessa, experienced the most violent transitions in Ukraine during the 1990s. Yanukovich, the Donetsk clan, and the Party of Regions were therefore no strangers to violence, and brought their style of politics and business to the national level in the 2004 elections and from 2006, when they were first elected as an independent political force.

Violence was also more likely under Yanukovich for four reasons. First, unlike Kuchma, who left office in 2004 after two terms, Yanukovich in 2013-2014 was preparing for his re-election in 2015, and there was never any doubt but that he sought to remain in power. The second was his penchant for extravagant palaces, such as Mezhyhirya near Kiev, and the imprisonment of political opponents, both of which pointed to his desire to remain in power at all costs and indefinitely. The third was a willingness to use vigilantes and security forces for paramilitary operations against his opponents. During the 2004 elections, Kuchma forbade the entrance of Donetsk vigilantes, who waited in the city's outskirts, into central Kiev, where they would have clashed with Orange Revolution supporters. The fourth was his closer ties to Putin, who held kompromat (compromising materials) on him going back decades when he had worked as a KGB informer reporting on organised crime groups in Donetsk (Leshchenko, 2014, pp. 57, 210-215, 218; Judah, 2014; Wilson, 2014, p.122). Putin held two key meetings with Yanukovich in Sochi (October 2013) and Valdai (January 2014), where he pressured him to drop the EU Association Agreement in the first instance and introduce tough, repressive legislation in the second (which was adopted on 16 January). Yanukovich failed to keep his resolve in the face of a popular protest radicalised by the killing of the 'heavenly hundred' and pursue the security operations to their conclusion. Putin admitted that he assisted Yanukovich in fleeing from Kiev. Russia had supplied anti-riot equipment to Ukraine in December 2013 and January 2014, and FSB officers were based in Kiev assisting in drawing up 'Operation Boomerang' to destroy the protests using overwhelming force (Wilson, 2014, pp. 89-93). The Ukrainian military, which has cooperated with NATO's Partnership for Peace programme since 1994, refused to become involved, as it had during the Orange Revolution (Kuzio, 2010a), and Ukraine's police forces were insufficient in number for the task of suppressing a mass protest movement.

The plan was for Yanukovich to address a founding congress of the Ukrainian Front (founded on 1 February in Kharkiv by the local vigilante organisation Oplot, pro-Russian politicians, former police Berkut special forces, and Night Wolves hell's angels) that would have brought together delegates from Russian-speaking eastern and southern Ukraine (Wilson, 2014, pp. 78-79). They planned to declare Kharkiv the capital of a new autonomous entity (whether 'Novorossiya' - 'New Russia' - is unclear) and invite Russian forces to intervene to 'protect' Russian speakers. Kharkiv is symbolically important, as it was the first capital of Soviet Ukraine from 1922-1934.

The Kharkiv congress was to emulate the November 2004 separatist congress in Severodonetsk, Luhansk oblast, which had pressured opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko to compromise during EU-brokered roundtable negotiations, except that the situation in 2014 was more critical, as the democratic revolution was unusual in not taking place during an election cycle. The Kharkiv congress did not attract sufficient delegates, and Yanukovich failed to attend after being advised by Donetsk oligarch Rinat Akhmetov and Kharkiv Governor Mykhaylo Dobkin that they would not support him. The Party of Regions (2014) had denounced Yanukovich in a strongly worded statement after he fled from Kiev, blaming him for the murder of protesters, and parliament had voted to remove him from power. He fled to Donetsk and Crimea, and eventually to Russia, from where he called for a Russian intervention in early March. These plans failed not only because Yanukovich left Ukraine, but also because pro-Russian uprisings failed to materialise in four out of Ukraine's eight Russian-speaking oblasts (Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhya, Kherson,

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Mykolayiv), and in another two swing regions (Kharkiv, Odessa). Pro-Maidan forces prevailed in the two crucial months of April and May 2014. Pro-Russian separatism only took hold in the Donbas (Donetsk, Luhansk), but even there it required the covert injection of Russian forces, some of whom had been involved in Russia's annexation of the Crimea, and by August, with separatists on the verge of being defeated, Russia's significant intervention, which turned the tide of battle. By the September ceasefire, Ukrainian forces controlled two thirds of the Donbas, and the DNR and LNR one third.

## **Western-supported Popular Protests (Bulldozer, Rose and Orange Revolutions, Euromaidan)**

Putin came to power soon after NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia, the detachment of Kosovo into a future independent state, and the bulldozer revolution in Serbia that was the first of what became called coloured or democratic revolutions. Kosovo had never been a Yugoslav republic and therefore, unlike the fifteen Soviet and six Yugoslav republics, it had no right under international law to become an independent state, a fact that Russian leaders have continually raised through to their justification of the annexation of the Crimea.

Russian and other post-Soviet leaders, including Yanukovich, were socialised within a conspiracy mindset and they therefore viewed these developments as one chain of events. This worldview deepened with the Rose and Orange Revolutions in 2003 and 2004, respectively, leading to calls in their legislatures (successful in Russia, unsuccessful in Ukraine) to clamp down on alleged Western intelligence support for NGOs and mass popular protests. Russian and Eastern Ukrainian leaders saw little difference between NATO's intervention in Serbia and the US invasion of Iraq, as both did not have UN authorisation.

The return to Soviet conspiratology was accompanied by a return to anti-Americanism first witnessed as early as during Ukraine's 2004 presidential elections. Yanukovich's election campaign, led by Russian political technologists (such as Gleb Pavlovsky) on loan from Putin, organised a 'directed chaos' strategy that portrayed Viktor Yushchenko, who has a Ukrainian-American spouse, as a US satrap and extreme nationalist. It was relatively easy to blame the Orange Revolution as a Western-backed putsch following such a negative campaign. Yanukovich's anti-Americanism took place while Ukrainians constituted the third largest military contingent in the US-led coalition in Iraq (and largest non-NATO force).

Needless to say, the Euromaidan that rocked Ukraine in November 2013 to February 2014 was also seen as a Western-backed putsch that overthrew a democratically elected President and brought 'fascists' to power. Yanukovich and Putin always believed the protests were led by extreme right nationalists ('fascists') in another example of the revival of Soviet ideological culture (Kryuchkov and Tabachnyk, 2008). Soviet ideological tirades were most prominent and vociferous against Baltic and especially Ukrainian 'bourgeois nationalists' through KGB-controlled institutions such as *Tovarystvo Ukrayiny* (shorthand for the Society for Cultural Relations with Ukrainians Abroad). Its two newspapers, *News from Ukraine* and *Visti z Ukrayiny*, specialised in uncovering alleged 'Nazi collaborators' in the Ukrainian diaspora.

Yanukovich could not comprehend the notion of individuals protesting as volunteers and unpaid civil society activists, as their experience is of a world where people attend rallies when they are induced by the threat of losing their state employment or receive payment in cash or kind. Yanukovich drew on 'political tourists' (i.e. paid rally participants) in the 2004 elections and when he was Prime Minister and President (2006-2007, 2010-2014). Differences between Eastern and Western Ukraine can be explained by the existence of a managed democracy and weak civil society in Sovietised Donetsk, and a far more active civil society, with its roots in the nineteenth century Austro-Hungarian Empire and inter-war Poland, in Western Ukraine (Beissinger, 2002; Kuzio, 2010b).

In the Soviet and Russian mindset towards Ukraine, seventeen million discriminated 'Russians' include ethnic Russians and Russian speakers who belong to the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World). Therefore, democratic revolutions propelled by large numbers of Western Ukrainian participants are inevitably anti-Russian, funded by the West, and dominated by 'nationalists' (equated as 'fascists'). Terms such as 'bourgeois nationalists' and 'fascists' in Soviet and post-Soviet usage have nothing in common with Western political science definitions of the term (Kryuchkov and Tabachnyk, 2008). In the USSR, such terms were applied against all shades of opinion that supported dissidents

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and Ukrainian cultural and political rights, and in the post-Soviet era against those who welcomed the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan and supported Ukraine's European integration. In the USSR, national communist Ivan Dzyuba, the author of *Internationalism or Russification?*, was therefore as much a 'bourgeois nationalist' as a Greek Catholic religious believer and member of the underground Ukrainian National Front in Soviet Galicia.

In a rather bizarre twist to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Donbas separatists have two extremist allies. The first are bona fide Russian fascists and neo-Nazis from the Russian Party of National Unity, who use a modified swastika as their party symbol and whose paramilitaries are fighting alongside separatists (see photographs at Shekhovtsov, 2014). Russian National Unity Party leader Aleksandr Barkashov's intercepted telephone conversation with Donetsk People's Republic leader Dmitriy Boitsov heard the former advising the latter to write that 89 per cent voted in favour in the May 2014 separatist referendum – a figure that became the official result (Barkashov and Boitsov, 2014; Wilson, 2014, p. 133). Crimean leader Sergei Aksyonov (with an organised criminal nickname of Goblin) is a long-time member of the Russian National Unity Party (Kuzio, 2014c). Moreover, Eurasianist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin was fired from Moscow State University after students protested against him saying Ukrainians 'must be killed, killed, killed' (Coynash, 2014a; Dugin, 2014).

The second are Europe's extreme left and right who have sent 'observers' to the March Crimean referendum and November 2014 'election,' and voted against ratification in the European Parliament of the EU Association Agreement (Coynash, 2014e; Orenstein, 2014). France's neo-Nazi Front National contributed the largest bloc of votes against the Association Agreement and has admitted receiving a large loan from a Russian bank.

## **NATO and EU Enlargement**

Russia had always opposed NATO enlargement and this came to a head in the case of Georgia and Ukraine in 2005-2008, when enlargement received the enthusiastic support of the US Bush administration. In April 2008, Putin told the NATO-Russia Council at the Bucharest NATO Summit that Ukraine was a 'fragile' and 'artificial' state, warning it would disintegrate if it joined NATO. Yushchenko strongly backed President Mikhail Saakashvili when he visited Tbilisi after Russia's invasion in August of that year. In Summer 2009, President Dmitri Medvedev laid out a host of demands for the next Ukrainian President that Yanukovich fulfilled, such as extending the lease on the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol until the middle of the century and ending support for NATO membership. Both of these Russian strategic objectives were threatened by Yanukovich's removal from power and replacement by what Moscow viewed as radical nationalists.

Russia's concerns about the Eastern Partnership (EaP), an EU initiative for post-Soviet states, was evident from its launch in 2009, even though it never laid out the prospect of future membership and was therefore derided by some Western scholars as 'enlargement-lite.' Russian worries were especially vociferous in the case of Ukraine, the largest of the EaP members. The effective separation of Ukraine's most pro-Russian regions (Crimea, Donbas) prevented their participation in the May 2014 presidential and October 2014 parliamentary preterm elections, which, coupled with the disintegration of the Party of Regions and unpopularity of its satellite Communist Party after Yanukovich fled from office, produced Ukraine's first pro-European parliamentary constitutional majority. Putin gained Crimea and part of the Donbas enclave, but lost Ukraine.

## **Russian Nationalism and Foreign Policy**

The evolution of Putin and his militocratic regime beholden to nationalistic ideology took place during the fifteen years that Ukraine transitioned through four Presidents – Kuchma (2000-2004), Yushchenko (2005-2010), Yanukovich (2010-2014), and Petro Poroshenko (2014 to present). Putin's best relations were with Kuchma, an Eastern Ukrainian and therefore not ideologically suspect, who was a member of the senior Soviet nomenklatura (which Yanukovich never was). Yushchenko was anathema to Russian leaders who may have been behind his September 2004 poisoning. Yanukovich was more palatable because of his Donetsk background and willingness to implement Russian demands, work with Crimean Russian nationalists, and give free rein to Russia's intelligence services in Crimea (something that would become useful in Spring 2014). Medvedev's 2009 open letter to Yushchenko followed the expulsion of two Russian diplomats from Crimea and Odessa for espionage and covert support for separatists

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and the pro-Russian extremist Rodina party. Valentyn Nalyvaychenko, the then Chairman of the SBU, resumed this position in February 2014 with a more expanded campaign against Russian GRU and FSB agents backing 'directed chaos' and separatism (Kuzio, 2015).

Relations with Poroshenko should have been similar to those with Kuchma, as both are centrists and not anti-Russian; Poroshenko was born in Odessa and had business interests in Russia. Poroshenko was a founding member of the Party of Regions in 2000-2001 and had been a cabinet minister in the second Azarov government. Nevertheless, Poroshenko supported the Euromaidan early on, before it was known if it would succeed, and he came to power three months after the annexation of Crimea and two months after Donbas broke down into separatist violence. As his constitutional duty is to protect Ukraine's territorial integrity, he therefore had little choice but to act as Commander-in-Chief.

Russian nationalism is closely bound with Soviet myths and national identity, and these inevitably influence attitudes towards Ukraine. In this worldview, 'New Russia' – the Tsarist term for Southern Ukraine, but now expanded to include Donbas – includes Ukraine's Russian speakers. Chauvinistic derision towards the Ukrainian language was inherited from the USSR and has always been strongest in Crimea and Donbas and in Russia more broadly (Fournier, 2002). Putin has described Ukraine as an 'artificial state' whose territory was often changed in the course of the twentieth century. More importantly, Putin has repeatedly stated that 'the Russian and Ukrainian people is practically one people' with 'common historical roots and common destiny, we have a common religion, a common faith, we have a similar culture, language, tradition, and mentality' (Wilson, 2014, pp. 148-149). A 'common destiny' implies that Ukraine can only have a future alongside Russia – not outside Russia's sphere of influence in Europe – while Putin's conservative values project is promoted with Europe and the West vilified as decadent and of a lower civilisation to Russia's (BBC Monitoring, 2014). Controlling Ukraine is not only a strategic objective for Russia to regain its great power status, but an important component of its national identity that has always stressed unity of the three Eastern Slavic peoples, beginning in Kievan Rus' and continuing to Tsarist Russia and the USSR, with the CIS Customs Union-Eurasian Union the natural home (not NATO or EU). Spiritual unity is provided by the Russian Orthodox Church, which has a greater number of parishes in Ukraine than in the Russian Federation.

## Conclusion

Ukraine descended into violence during and after the Euromaidan for the four reasons outlined above. Yanukoych and the Party of Regions had different social origins to Eastern Ukrainian centrists and were more willing to use violence and to back Russian objectives. The Euromaidan took place fourteen years after Putin first came to power, during which Russian nationalism and Soviet political culture began to be more influential, producing strongly negative attitudes to Ukrainian national identity defined outside the Russkii Mir, democratic revolutions, and NATO and EU enlargement.

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