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Adam Fagan, Petr Kopecký

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Andrew Wilson

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EXPLAINING UKRAINE

Andrew Wilson

The 'Ukraine Crisis' that exploded in 2014 was in fact many crises, and not all of them of Ukraine's making (Wilson, 2014b). Much academic debate ensued as to whether the main problems were internal or external, pre-existing or artificial (Portnov, 2015). This chapter cannot cover everything that has been written on these and other subjects in the last twenty-five years, even before the recent upsurge of scholarly attention. The chapter hence serves as a selection of some of the best work both before and after 2014, concentrating almost exclusively on Western sources available in English.

The crisis came just shy of a quarter century since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. Paradoxically, Ukraine both played a considerable and even decisive part in the Soviet endgame (Plokhy, 2014) and was unprepared for the independence that followed. Modern Ukraine is a kaleidoscope of different regions with different histories, many of which have taken their turn to be at the forefront of previous eras of independence; but the period since 1991 is the first time all have co-existed together in an independent state (Plokhy, 2015). Modern Ukraine was established more by Soviet power than by Ukrainian nationalism, both in terms of its borders and the institutional and cultural legacies that have shaped the era since 1991. Ukrainians themselves often talked of 'project Ukraine' after 1991 – a new state and in many ways a new nation, unsure whether its many internal differences were a strength or a weakness.

This chapter is in four main parts. First is an introduction, which segues with an examination of underlying regional and linguistic distinctions within Ukraine. Special attention is paid to the position of the Crimea and the Donbas region before war broke out in 2014. Second is an examination of the political system, including both formal arrangements of the constitution and the 'informal politics' that lies beneath. The third section describes the tension between a corrupt and predatory state and a civil society that has grown in strength since 1991, resulting in the 'Orange Revolution' in 2004 and the 'Revolution of Dignity' in 2014. The fourth section looks at Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea and the causes and consequences of the war in the east.

Introduction

Most analyses that came out after independence in 1991 placed Ukraine within a conventional transition paradigm. Although Motyl (1993, 1997) stressed how difficult transforming totalitarianism would be, and how building an effective state would have to come first, as the pre-existing

Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was more of a cartographical than an administrative reality. Others talked of Ukraine's exceptional problems facing three, or even four, simultaneous transitions: building a new state, a democracy, a functioning economy, and a new sense of national identity (Kuzio, 2001).

It also became commonplace to argue that Ukraine had achieved independence without a revolution. The opposition movement to communist rule in Ukraine during the Gorbachev era was not strong enough to win power on its own or to push for radical change. The main group, Rukh, could only win a quarter of the vote in the areas of west Ukraine that had once been under Habsburg rule and in areas with large concentrations of Ukrainian-speaking elites, including the capital Kyiv. Moreover, the movement was split on whether or not to cooperate with former communists so long as they backed independence. Those in favour accepted a 'Grand Bargain' in 1991 – former communist elites were in charge of the transition, and shaped it to their benefit (D'Anieri, 2007b, chapter four). There was no formal 'round table' process to encourage proper compromise.

By the late 1990s the idea of Ukraine's 'transition' was exposed as a teleological fallacy. Hale (2015) argued that post-Soviet states like Ukraine were characterised by rigidity more than by change, and were stuck in cycles of 'patronal politics'. Patronal networks were so deeply embedded that local regimes remained stuck in hybridity, 'alternately moving toward or away from democracy and autocracy while never quite seeming to make a decisive leap to one or the other' (Hale, 2015, p. 5). Revolution or democratic breakthrough is therefore not what it seems. 'The moving parts of highly patronalistic politics . . . arrange and rearrange themselves in regular, even predictable ways that might on the surface look like a regime "change" but that in reality reflect a stable core of informal institutions and operating principles' (Hale, 2015, p. 15).

Another model was Way's (2004) idea of 'pluralism by default', rather than by successful transition. D'Anieri (2007a, 2011) argued in a similar fashion that Ukraine's structural constraints made a profound shift in *either* direction unlikely, either a democratic breakthrough or an authoritarian consolidation – at least until Viktor Yanukovych was president from 2010 to 2014.

The regional question

Regional divisions were a key part of this 'pluralism by default' picture, promoting both balance and gridlock (Barrington and Herron, 2004; Sasse, 2010). Birch (2000, p. 1017) and others have argued that regional differences are a factor in themselves, more salient than other constituent factors like language: 'careful analyses of individual-level data reveal that even when socio-demographic attributes are controlled for, region still exerts an independent influence'. Moreover, Birch argued, the difference between regions is not purely economic, but is mainly an accumulated political culture effect, due to the differing historical experiences of the different regions.

A second key issue is the depth and severity of regional divides, especially when the very existence of the current Ukrainian state came under threat in 2014. However, it has always been misleading to depict Ukraine as sharply and evenly polarised, and therefore split down the middle, as many were tempted to argue in 2014. Part of the legacy effect of so many different regional histories was that identities and politics in particular regions were hybrid and/or fluid (Pirie, 1996). This was especially true of the regions between the 'poles' of Lviv and Donetsk (Rodgers, 2008; Zhurzhenko, 2010). If Rukh represented a quarter of the population in 1990–1991, then the other three quarters were not solidly against Rukh's nationalist and pro-Ukrainian policies, but were made up of a mixture of neo-Soviet, Russian-speaking, and dual-identity populations, both Russian-Ukrainian and Ukrainian-regional (Wilson, 2002).

Both high politics and identity politics remained fractured in the 1990s. The 2000s saw some consolidation of national identity and the rise of a new post-Rukh reform movement after the Gongadze scandal. In eastern and southern Ukraine, however, the pragmatic patronalism of President Kuchma (1994–2005) was replaced by the more ideological Party of Regions. Both sides deliberately polarised elections around identity issues from 2004 to 2012, as neither really wanted to fight on issues of corruption and state capture. Mutual distrust and negative stereotyping between the regions, and between the regions and Kyiv, would perhaps have been better contained by formal power-sharing mechanisms, rather than the uncertain informal rules of balance in Ukrainian politics, which were always perceived to be at risk when power threatened to change hands in Kyiv. Internal identity politics was also interconnected with foreign policy preferences, and was in part defined by them (Gentile, 2015). Regional polarisation within Ukraine was exacerbated by foreign policy battles, rather than the other way around.

On the other hand, public opinion remained fairly stable in 2013 and has shown extensive support for statehood, despite these internal divisions. Interestingly, the main factors shifting sentiment were not internal identity issues, but rather were either economic or external. Support for independence decreased during times of economic crisis, particularly in the early 1990s and in 1998–1999, but rose when Russia (not Ukraine) was in conflict with its neighbours, most notably in 1994 (the beginning of the first Chechen war) and 2008 (the war in Georgia). Overall, apart from the dip in the early 1990s, support for Ukrainian independence remained remarkably stable at around three quarters of the population (Khmel'ko, 2011; 'Issledovanie', 2011).

Two surveys by Kulyk (2015), in 2012 and 2014, go further and show a gradual shift towards a more solid national identity. Those identifying primarily with the nation rose from 51 per cent to 61 per cent, the number identifying primarily with their region remained steady at 9 per cent, while parochial (village or city) identities declined from 28 per cent to 21 per cent.

The language question

Ukraine has had constant disputes about language, even before independence in 1991; the first attempt to solve the problem was a 'Law on Languages' passed in the Communist era in 1989. The Ukrainosphere is still small (Olszański, 2012), given that Ukrainian is the state language. The share of Ukrainian in mass media and popular culture is much less than the percentage of ethnic Ukrainians at the last census in 2001, which was 77.8 per cent, or those who gave Ukrainian as their 'mother tongue', which was 67.5 per cent. In terms of day-to-day use, many more ethnic Ukrainians are de facto Russophone or use the hybrid known as *surzhyk*; the share of regular users of Russian and Ukrainian is more or less even, but the use of Russian is slanted towards urban areas and groups with more education.

When Russian speakers have complained about 'Ukrainisation', it has been about threats to exclusively Russian mono-lingualism in urban areas of the east and south. This dates from the requirement in the 1996 constitution, strengthened by a 2000 Constitutional Court ruling, requiring the use of Ukrainian 'in all spheres of social life [*suspil'noho zhyttia* – interpreted to mean official state communications] on all the territory of Ukraine'. There has also been a gradual administrative increase in the number of schoolchildren with Ukrainian as 'their primary language of instruction . . . to 82 percent by 2011' (Arel, 2014). The 2012 law 'On the Principles of State Language Policy' adopted under Yanukovych was controversial, not because Russian needed protection to survive or thrive, but rather because it threatened to allow Russian speakers to get around the bureaucratic push towards supporting Ukrainian.

Language has been politicised, both directly and as a proxy for broader identity politics, in all elections since 1994. However, the language issue always faded in importance between elections,

because politicians ignored their promises and civic activism did not really sustain the issue. Since 2014, Ukraine is no longer divided into two camps, both eager to exploit the issue; eastern and southern Ukraine first shrank with the loss of Crimea and half the Donbas and then was transformed by the war. The annexation of Crimea and the war with Russian-backed forces has increased the salience of the political culture divide between all Ukrainians and Putin's Kremlin, rather than ethnic or linguistic divides. In a 2011 Pew survey, 84 per cent of Ukrainians held a favourable view of Russia; that dropped to 35 per cent in 2014 following the Crimean events – and to only 21 per cent by May 2015 (Toal and O'Loughlin, 2015; 'Ukraine: Russian Influence Unwelcome', 2014)

Crimea and the Donbas before 2014

Academic debate had long looked at the special problems of Crimea and the Donbas before the eruption of protests and military conflict in 2014. In the early years of independence, the Donbas was regarded as having both the most 'Soviet' identity of any region in Ukraine and strong social identities (by class and age). This Soviet identity was then gradually replaced, not by overt Russian nationalism, but by a strong regional identity, which was compatible with broader Ukrainian or Russian identities, so long as the Donbas had autonomy (Kuromiya, 2008, 2015). The number citing a regional identity in the Donbas was 69.5 per cent in 2004 (Hrytsak, 2007, p. 50).

Crimea remained a special case, although even here there was some effort to promote a regional identity of the 'Crimean people'. According to the local academic Mal'gin (2000),

> irredentism was never the dominant mentality of the Russian-speaking majority in the peninsula . . . the idea of recreating the Crimean autonomy was based primarily on the need to distance itself from Moscow and establish local control over the use of resources of the Crimea and its environment . . . In this respect, Crimean autonomism was very reminiscent of regionalism in Siberia and the Urals, with their views on the value of a small regional homeland.

This idea of Crimea as a local 'small homeland', however, was also founded on multiple supposed external threats, an amalgam of opposition to 'Ukrainianism as a myth', 'Euro-Atlanticism as a geopolitical construct', 'the myth of Crimean Tatar indigenousness', and Crimeans' own apathy (Filatov, 2011), as well as hostility to Moscow, Kyiv, and eventually the Donbas (see below) as external rulers.

Patronal or clan politics cut both ways in both Crimea and the Donbas: it reconciled local populations to Ukraine so long as 'our guys' were in charge, but it made local politics very volatile whenever a change of power looked possible at a national level. Opinion on the question of 'separation' from Ukraine was thus often volatile. 'Autonomy' was valued as much as 'union' (with Russia), so the exact wording of opinion polls could yield different responses. In 2012, 40 per cent in Crimea preferred 'autonomy within Ukraine' whereas 38 per cent backed 'autonomy within Russia' ('Vse men'she Krymchan khotiat videt' poluostrov v sostave Rossii', 2012).

Formal politics

Ukraine was the last post-Soviet state to adopt a new constitution, in 1996. Before then arrangements were confusing and ad hoc. After 1996, the new system was technically 'semi-presidential', with a dual executive headed by both a president and a prime minister, but the prime minister was largely dependent on the president. Parliament could only ratify the president's choice of prime

minister, and the president's decrees had similar authority to normal legislation, although the president had only limited dissolution powers (Protsyk, 2003). The separation of powers between the three branches of state was imperfect: the president appointed the all-powerful chief prosecutor, a hangover from the 'people's justice' of the Soviet era; the highest court, the Constitutional Court, was not independent but subject to 'balanced control', which in fact meant gridlock – a third of its eighteen members were appointed by parliament, a third by the president, and a third by a Congress of Judges (which gave the president an additional avenue of influence). The state was unitary, with the exception of Crimea's federal status. However, the power of Crimea's government was again checked by veto powers held by the president in Kyiv.

Informal power also clustered around the president (see below). The system was therefore de facto presidential (D'Anieri, 2007b). It almost tipped towards super-presidentialism in 2000, when second president Leonid Kuchma organised a controversial referendum to aggrandise presidential power. His attempts were derailed by the Gongadze scandal.

One of the few achievements of the Orange Revolution in 2004 was that a coalition of forces agreed to change the constitution to give parliament more power – but their different aims meant a largely botched reform process. 'Orange' forces wanted a 'more European' system. The old guard and the oligarchs (see below) thought they were well-entrenched in parliament and this would protect them against radical change.

The new constitution first sought to strengthen the party system. All 450 MPs would now be elected by proportional representation (PR) on national lists. An 'imperative mandate' was introduced to stop 'political tourism': MPs had to stay in the parties that they were elected to represent or be expelled. A formal 'majority' would be created from party groups in any new parliament, and the prime minister would only be answerable to that majority. Parliament would sit for five years.

The new system began with two 'false starts'. The changes came into force in 2006, by which time the original 'Orange' government had collapsed. The 2006 elections then produced deadlock and eventual power-sharing with Yushchenko's 2004 opponent, Viktor Yanukovych, as prime minister, which ended in further confrontation and new elections in 2007. This time the system worked better, and Yuliya Tymoshenko was made prime minister until 2012.

But this more balanced version of the constitution never worked as well as its supporters had hoped – partly because the changes were prepared in haste, and partly because they institutionalised competition and overlapping competences between the president and prime minister. Yushchenko, Tymoshenko, and Yanukovych were constantly at odds, or plotting against each other in turn, from 2004 to 2010.

There was therefore less resistance to Yanukovych's centralisation of power after he won the 2010 election, with the presidency taking over the other branches of government. Tymoshenko was still prime minister under the terms of the 2004 constitution, but was removed after accusations of bribery and pressure on MPs' business interests, and replaced by a Party of Regions' loyalist, Mykola Azarov. Next was a legal reform in the summer of 2010 to establish complete executive control over the judiciary. Two new courts were created, the Higher Civil Court and High Criminal Court, to bypass those that still had some semblance of independence. Other courts were purged. The High Council of Justice and High Qualifying Commission were given vast new powers over judicial appointments, salaries, promotions, and dismissals – all under the executive branch.

The weakened Constitutional Court restored the 1996 constitution in October 2010, but this only capped the process of centralising control. But Yanukovych did much more than restore the status quo that had existed before the Orange Revolution. Kuchma had used informal politics to manipulate Ukrainian democracy, while Yanukovych progressively dismantled it. Kuchma

balanced the oligarchy (see below); Yanukovych tried to lead it and was much more corrupt (Wilson, 2014a). The Yanukovych era was also exceptional for having such a strong, even hegemonic and authoritarian, ruling party in the Party of Regions (Kuzio, 2015), used to channel control over all the branches of state authority. The newly supine courts were used for a string of 'political prosecutions' against opponents in 2011, including Tymoshenko, who was sentenced to seven years in jail and fined $188 million. Changes made for the 2012 legislative elections gave Yanukovych even more control: the 'imperative mandate' was ignored, and half of MPs were now elected from territorial constituencies where vote-buying and voter intimidation was easier.

The old 'Orange' constitution was restored after Yanukovych's flight in February 2014, but was still not amended properly. Once again, changes were made in haste, and constitutional reform was no longer a priority after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in east Ukraine. Early elections for both president and parliament in May and October 2014, with Crimea and half of the Donbas unable to vote and public opinion radicalised, led to self-declared 'reformists' controlling the presidency, parliament, and government, but conflicts continued beneath the surface. The 2004 constitution still seemed to institutionalise conflict, with the government appointed in December 2014 collapsing in February 2016.

Informal politics

Another reason why constitutional engineering never had the desired effect was that broader problems were channelled through the political and constitutional system. 'Informal politics' trumped formal politics. Moreover, the practices that maintain what locals call '*sistema*' (Ledeneva, 2013) – patronal networks, and the exchange of money and favour across nominal barriers of politics, media, and business – have acquired the ability to reproduce themselves.

One such practice was described by Wilson (2005) as 'virtual politics': public politics in Ukraine, and other post-Soviet states, had become corrupted by what locals called 'political technology'. In such a world, constitutions and public policy statements did not really matter (Hale, 2011). Many parties were entirely fake; most established parties were to some degree fronts for business interests. A whole universe of dirty tricks existed around them, from the abuse of 'administrative resources' to fix elections on the ground to the use of agents and agents provocateurs to manipulate other political parties. 'Political technology' was therefore the key to what Levitsky and Way (2010) called 'competitive authoritarian' regimes, and their need to slant apparently open competition for power in incumbents' favour.

Neither the Orange Revolution nor the Euromaidan led to the disappearance of 'political technology'. The key problem was that patronal networks and oligarchs continued to control mainstream television, from which most Ukrainian citizens took their political cues, and sold their proxies and 'project' parties and politicians on these channels. In March 2016 the main oligarch-controlled television channels had a market share of 75 per cent ('Top channels', 2016).

Ukraine is also one of the most oligarchic post-Soviet states – as of 2013 the richest fifty individuals controlled almost half of GDP (Wilson, 2013). Ukrainian politics was first exposed as a naked fight between equally corrupt clans when President Kuchma clashed with his former Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko in 1998–1999 (Lazarenko was accused of embezzling $200 million and received a nine-year prison sentence after fleeing to the US in 2006). This was quickly followed by the Gongadze scandal in 2000–2001 (Darden, 2001), the death of the editor of Ukraine's first investigative internet site 'Ukrainian Truth' (*Ukraïns'ka pravda*), and President Kuchma's apparent complicity in the scandal revealed by recordings covertly made in his office in 1999–2000.

The Ukrainian oligarchy has proven extremely adept at maintaining its influence, despite Ukraine having had five presidents since 1991 to potentially disrupt their power (Matuszak, 2012). The state is weaker than in Russia, and there has never been any local equivalent of the imprisonment of Russia's richest man Mikhail Khodorkovskii in 2003, to rein in oligarchic influence. Façade politics and 'political technology' gives the Ukrainian oligarchs perfect methods for exercising influence behind the scenes. Oligarchic rent-seeking remains the main factor behind Ukraine's corrupt politics and economic underperformance (Wilson, 2013).

The Orange Revolution

Oligarchy, corruption, and informal practice do not always go unchallenged. Ukraine has had at least two would-be 'revolutions', in 2004 and 2014. The first, the 'Orange Revolution' in 2004, was sparked by protests against a fraudulent election, as Yanukovych manoeuvred to succeed Kuchma as president. Hundreds of thousands occupied the Maidan (the main square) in central Kyiv for seventeen days (Wilson, 2005; McFaul and Åslund, 2006). The protests were framed against the Kuchma era and the hope for a more democratic future; but Beissinger has cited survey evidence to depict the Orange protestors as just as partisan as their opponents: they 'were highly diverse in their preferences on most of the major issues of the day, and most were weakly committed to the values of the revolution's democratic master narratives' (2013, p. 16). The protests were ultimately also focused on elite outcomes; the crowds wanted to see Viktor Yushchenko elected president, and then they went home.

Bunce and Wolchik (2011) attributed the success of the protests to their innovative tactics, especially the carnivalesque use of telegenic images, and 'strategic non-violence' tactics taken from Gene Sharp (Wilson, 2008) to exploit the weak spots of 'competitive authoritarian' regimes (Mitchell, 2012). D'Anieri (2006) and Levitsky and Way (2006), on the other hand, stressed elite weaknesses, namely the quick disappearance of elite unity behind Yanukovych and in the security forces and the reluctance to use repression. The growth of civil society was a largely premature factor in 2004 (Lutsevych, 2013); non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and independent media really came into their own during and after the Euromaidan (Way, 2014).

Five years of 'Orange' government produced many important changes, including a new constitution, freer and fairer elections, a more pluralistic media free from state censorship (though not from oligarchs' control), and a change in attitudes on the key historical issue of the Holodomor (the famine of the 1930s). But there was no reprise of the campaign to clean up the economy when Yushchenko was prime minister in 1999–2001; the 'oligarchy' remained untouched, and there was huge disappointment relative to expectations. Continuing corruption led to the phenomena of 'Ukraine fatigue' abroad and 'Orange fatigue' at home. Yanukovych was able to exploit both to consolidate power in 2010–2013 – the most damning evidence of the limited gains of the 'Orange' years (O'Brien, 2010).

Foreign policy: between informal Russia and the bureaucratic West

Russia reacted to the Orange Revolution by building up its 'soft power' abroad (Popescu and Wilson, 2009; Horvath, 2012; Lutsevych, 2016). New NGO networks and media projects in states like Ukraine added to existing informal business networks to bind together Russian and Ukrainian patronalism. Although Yushchenko briefly attempted to exclude the GRU from Crimea, he did little to combat the build-up of these networks. When Yanukovych signed an agreement with Russia on extending the lease of the Black Sea Fleet in April 2010, secret protocols

gave a green light to Russian infiltration of all the Ukrainian 'force' ministries – defence, interior, and security services (Kuzio, 2012).

Russia began working hard at exporting 'alternative identities' to Ukraine (Zhurzhenko, 2014), aiding the rise of separatist sentiments in both Crimea and the Donbas (Katchanovski, 2014), but these were still minority sentiments. According to opinion polls in early 2014, only 41 per cent backed union with Russia in Crimea ('How relations between Ukraine and Russia should look', 2014), and only 27.5 per cent in Donetsk and 30.3 per cent in Luhansk (with only 11.9 per cent and 13.2 per cent 'definitely' preferring union) ('Mneniia i vzgliady', 2014).

Russia concentrated on exploiting Ukraine's informal politics. This meant it was playing on familiar turf. However, it was the nature of informal politics that local clients were not always reliable, as they had their own networks. European Union (EU) involvement, on the other hand, was based on Ukraine adopting EU norms, rules and policy instruments, without too much analysis of the realities of patronal and informal politics; and the US version of conditionality put more emphasis up front on democracy and human rights (McFaul, 2007). Some critics have accused both Washington and Brussels of pushing the idea of 'broader Europe' at the expense of a 'greater Europe' including Russia, and using Ukraine as a geopolitical wedge to push back Russia (Sakwa, 2015b). Russia was supposedly moved to intervene by its perceived sense of threat from the West in general and NATO in particular (Mearsheimer, 2014; Sakwa, 2015a), though some of the same authors have also minimised the level of Russian involvement. The particular threat to the Russian Black Sea base in Crimea is perhaps a more plausible explanation for intervention (Treisman, 2016).

The EU missed an opportunity to upgrade relations to a more strategic level just after the 2004 Orange Revolution. Ukraine was offered a series of technocratic policies, including bilateral negotiations on an Association Agreement with a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) begun in 2007 and finished in 2012, and the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy launched in 2009 (Wolczuk and Dragneva-Lewers, 2015). However, by 2012 the deterioration of democracy under Yanukovych, symbolised by the imprisonment of Tymoshenko, meant the Association Agreement was put on hold, even before Yanukovych dramatically halted negotiations to unfreeze it in November 2013.

Russia, on the other hand, began to ramp up plans for its rival Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) after Putin was re-elected as Russian president in 2012. The conflict between the EU and EEU was often presented as mainly a dispute between rival trade blocs, but it was also about informal politics, with the Yanukovych elite trying to preserve local corrupt practices.

The conflict was also about rival sovereignty projects. The key weakness of the EU's Eastern Partnership policy was that it did not offer the pooled sovereignty security benefits enjoyed by EU member states, while exposing Ukraine to Russian hostility; not because of much-heralded yet often minimal direct trade impacts, but because of the potential losses to informal Russian business in Ukraine. The key weakness of the EEU, on the other hand, was that it was dominated by Russia and by Russia's informal politics. It could not be a version of the EU, because without any local rule of law, it implied a massive loss of sovereignty to any joiners.

The key weakness of the Yanukovych government was that it tried to do two things at once: it was linked to Russian interests by informal politics, but it also continued the long Ukrainian tradition of using foreign policy as a balancing strategy to build up weak sovereignty (Gnedina, 2015). The final contradiction was that Yanukovych's opponents looked on the EU Agreement instrumentally, as a way of pushing back against Yanukovych's domestic project. The political crisis that erupted in 2013 combined all these tensions, and it was all the more powerful because it was not just about trade.

The Revolution of Dignity

Few predicted, however, the protests that became known as the 'Revolution of Dignity' in 2013–2014 (for an exception, see Motyl, 2013), although several commentators had identified underlying stresses that threatened the regime of President Yanukovych in the long run (Riabchuk, 2012).

The protests were sparked by Yanukovych rejecting the deal with the EU and were in the same (core) place as the 2004 'Maidan'; but they lasted for three months and went through many different phases. At their outset, many interpreters and protest leaders still talked and thought within the old paradigm of non-violent and self-limiting 'revolution' (Ackerman et al., 2014); but by the time of the dénouement in February 2014, they had clearly evolved into something else, even if it was not clear what this was, even two years later. Applebaum (2014) claimed in January 2014 that 'the "color revolution" model is dead': what were 'competitive authoritarian' regimes in the 2000s were now more firmly entrenched and defended, and would take different tactics to dislodge.

The nature of the protests also changed radically over three months – ironically because they initially seemed unlikely to succeed against the regime, and there was no obvious or agreed exit strategy. Onuch and Sasse (2016) stress 'the fluid and contingent nature of cleavages commonly portrayed as fixed and politically salient'. 'Neither the regime nor the party-based political opposition and activists were able to fully comprehend or manage this inherent diversity. Their misjudgements, in turn, created opportunities for the rise of radical voices and violent repertoires'.

The role of Ukrainian nationalists in the protests and eventual uprising has been much discussed, and that of the far right in particular (Shekhovtsov, 2015). In February 2014 the Euromaidan Self-Defence forces had thirty-nine *sotnia* (literally 'hundreds', approximately translated to a 'military company') of variable size, which meant a maximum of about 12,000 individuals in total. The main far-right group Right Sector was the twenty-third *sotnia*, with around 300 estimated members in January. The Freedom Party (*Svoboda*) was the second *sotnia*, with about 150 members (Likachev, 2014). Three hundred or even 450 activists can make a difference, but Right Sector was neither a Leninist vanguard party leading an assault on power, nor a Trotskyist group using entryism to leverage influence over larger organisations. In fact, it was the other way around. Criminal groups muscled their way in, and oligarchs bought influence.

There are distasteful and dangerous nationalists in Ukraine, like everywhere else; but most are of a new vintage (Olszański, 2015). Ukraine's old nationalists were part of the old politics; mainly for show, often as a cover for business interests, and nearly always infiltrated, controlled, and neutered by the local security services. Their poor performance in the 2014 elections was widely noticed, but the trauma of war has produced some increase in support since then – which is the opposite causation to Russia claiming Ukrainian fascism as *casus belli*.

Events in Crimea and the East

Russia's annexation of Crimea in spring 2014 was a surprise to most, because it was designed to succeed by surprise; but Crimea had long been seen as a flashpoint, particularly after the war in Georgia in 2008 (Popescu and Wilson, 2009). The annexation itself could hardly be described as anything other than a coup (Berezovets, 2015; Temirgaliev, 2016). Although there was clearly some support for the pro-Russian position (see above), the key mechanics of the takeover were armed force and disregard for constitutional principle, rather than popular mobilisation. There were big crowds in Sevastopol in the days before the coup, many of whom were connected to the Russian fleet, but in the local capital Simferopol pro-Russian and anti-Maidan forces were

always outnumbered by the Crimean Tatars, plus a smattering of pro-Maidan forces including local football 'ultras' (Temirgaliev, 2016). The cover story of Sevastopol troops and Russian special forces being local 'self-defence forces' did not last long ('Putin's narrative on Crimea takes an evolutionary leap', 2015). All of the key decisions were taken at gunpoint, by a possibly inquorate local assembly (Berezovets, 2015).

The causes of the conflict in the Donbas are, however, still disputed, particularly the question of whether the events had mainly internal or external causes (for an overview see Wilson, 2016b). Analysts such as Kudelia (2014) and Giuliano (2015) have focused primarily on internal Ukrainian factors, namely alienation from Kyiv and the politics of the Maidan. Zhukov (2016) argues for the predominance of economic motives, arguing that anti-Kyiv resistance was strongest in areas dominated by the industries (machine-building) most at risk from any disruption of trade with Russia – and from Russian sanctions. Arel and Driscoll (2015) emphasise 'regime collapse' in Kyiv.

However, Wilson (2016b) argued that although a baseline of discontent clearly existed, the key triggers towards conflict escalation were all external, that is Russian. Anti-Kyiv protests were not surprising in 2014, but Ukrainian political life since 1991 had been shaken but not fundamentally altered by the Euromaidan. Without Russian involvement, a civil conflict would not have escalated into a full-blown war (Mitrokhin, 2015; Sutyagin, 2015).

Russia's measures included covert GRU support for initial activists and demonstrations, the 'bussing in' of extra numbers to reinforce those demonstrations from across the border, the stationing of Russian troops on the border to destabilise the situation, the supply of men and materials, and increasingly direct military involvement in the summer of 2014, *before* the decisive battle at Ilovaisk in August ('Russia's Path to War', 2015).

Regional elites also made a massive difference. In Kharkiv, Kyiv did a deal with corrupt local leaders, allowing them to stay in power so long as they did not engage with separatists. Dnipropetrovsk elites reinvented themselves as guardians of the new Ukraine. But in the Donbas both the former Yanukovych elite and key remaining local oligarchs either actively facilitated the protests or played both sides (Portnov, 2016). That said, further research is very much needed in all of these areas.

After 2014

The Euromaidan, the fall of Yanukovych, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in the east have finally provided stimuli to invigorate Ukraine's hitherto sclerotic political system. Ukraine has become both more nationalist (Olszański, 2015) and more relaxed about internal pluralism (Hrytsak, 2015). Ukraine may finally have the key civic ideas (protest, martyrs, and a successful defensive war) that a civic identity needs; and previously blurred identities in the east and south may be consolidating (Zhurzhenko, 2014; Fomina, 2014; Riabchuk, 2015).

On the other hand, as after the Orange Revolution, it has proven extremely difficult to reform Ukraine's dysfunctional institutions and corrupt informal culture (Wilson, 2016a). Important reforms were made under duress in 2014, including fiscal retrenchment, some military reform, and steps towards energy independence. It was hoped that the relative ceasefire achieved in the east in September 2015 would allow renewed focus on domestic reform, but it did the opposite. Political stasis and corruption returned at the highest levels. Presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014, and local elections in 2015, failed to 'reboot' the political system, which remained rife with informal politics, political technology, and the interpenetration of money and media.

Conclusions

A quarter of a century after the fall of communism in East Central Europe in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991, the Ukrainian example showed that transforming 'post-communist' states and societies was even harder than the original attempt to move away from communism. The academic paradigms that dominated Ukrainian studies in the years immediately after 1991, particularly the focus on transition, were therefore long out of date. Work that was based on too much Russian mythology exaggerated problems of stasis by endorsing the idea of a fatally divided or even non-existent Ukraine. Studies that looked at Ukraine through the lens of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy shared many of the same faults of that policy, namely a Brussels-centred teleology of voluntary approximation to EU norms and practices and an over-focus on elites. There were, however, many encouraging signs of democratisation from below, with the impressive growth of civil society.

The most promising areas for future academic study might therefore be the self-replicating nature of post-communism and the strength of the challenge from below. Analysts will also keep returning to the dramatic events of 2014, because so much was compressed into such a short time, and the seismic consequences are yet to fully unfold.

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