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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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U kraine has historically been at the strategic crossroads of Europe and it remains so today. An ongoing armed conflict in its eastern territory of Donbas and Russian control over Crimea are manifestations of both Ukraine's history and its current challenges.

Ukraine has a long and complex history, which can be summarized as a push-pull between Western and Eastern Europe. Essentially, following the period of relative unity as Kievan Rus or Kyivan Rus, by the 12th century the Mongols occupied the lands of Ukraine. With the decline of Mongol rule, Ukraine was pulled westward by rulers of Lithuania, Poland, Hungary and Austria and to the east by Muscovy and Imperial Russia.

Over time, Ukraine's territory was reassembled piecemeal. The Third Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1795) and the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 consolidated much of the Ukrainian landmass and its people. An independent Ukraine existed briefly in the turbulent period following the Russian Revolution in 1917 and its eventual absorption into the Soviet Union by 1922 as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukrainian SSR).

The final remaining pieces to be added to the Ukrainian SSR were Polish Volhynia (1939), Transcarpathia (1945), Romanian islands (1948) and Crimea (1954).

With the Soviet Union's impending collapse in 1991, the Ukrainian SSR proclaimed itself independent in December 1991. Poland and Canada were the first states to recognize Ukrainian independence on December 2.

In this post-Soviet space, Ukraine began the task of building a state in post-Cold War Europe. The defining features of this challenge were, and remain to this day, internal economic and political reforms transitioning from the Soviet model to that of Western Europe, and Ukraine's external relationships.

The Challenge of Ukraine's External Relationships

The emergence of independent Ukraine was the culmination of an historical chain of events that began in late 1989 with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany in 1990. The Warsaw Pact ended early in 1991. In this context, Ukraine began the process of transformation and reform.

As Ukraine embarked on its new path, it had to manage its historical ties with both Western Europe and the successor state to the Soviet Union: Russia. Violent conflicts soon arose in some of the newly independent former Soviet states. Separatist movements in Moldova and Georgia led to Russian intervention and placement of peacekeeping forces to create frozen conflicts. The violent dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Armenian ethnic enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh also brought in [Russian intervention to freeze the conflict.](#)

While the Russians were managing their interests in the post-Soviet space (or "near abroad" as they termed it at the time), Ukraine was finding its place and balance in this neighbourhood. On the western borders of Ukraine, the West was moving closer in a formal manner with the eventual transition of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania as member states of NATO and the European Union (EU).

From 1991 to 2014, Ukraine managed to balance its external relationships between the push and pull of East and West. Ukraine became an active member of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994 while at the same time maintaining a relationship to the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This balance ended in late 2013 and early 2014 with the ouster of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich and the Maidan revolt.

The Crossroads Turn Violent

Matters came to a head on whether Ukraine would press ahead with an association agreement with the EU or take a large and favourable loan from Russia. Yanukovich's decision to pivot towards Russia led to a revolt by Western-leaning Ukrainians and the events of Maidan. The response by Eastern-leaning Ukrainians in the Donbas region was a counter-revolt against the pivot away from Russia. The Russians immediately provided military and political support for the Donbas rebels in the Oblasts of Luhansk and Donetsk.

With the prospect of a Ukrainian pivot to the West, the Russians moved swiftly to undertake a bloodless military seizure of Crimea. In practical terms, the Russians were concerned about the future basing rights for their Black Sea fleet in the port of Sevastopol should Ukraine move to join NATO. Nationalistically, the Russians viewed Crimea as historically part of Russia, having been conquered by Catherine the Great in a war with the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century.

The stage was set for the most serious confrontation in Europe since the end of the Cold War, (the civil war in former Yugoslavia of the 1990s notwithstanding). The push-pull of Ukraine became literally a military conflict engaging Ukrainian military forces against Ukrainian Donbas rebels, supported by Russian military advisors and special contingents. Fighting continued throughout 2014. Negotiations to end the fighting led by France and Germany under the Normandy Process agreed on an abortive ceasefire arrangement in September known as Minsk 1. Fighting then resumed and was brought under control with further negotiations culminating in the Minsk 2 Protocol in February 2015. The Minsk 2 Protocol contained a roadmap to an eventual peaceful settlement over the conflict in Donbas. Crimea was not part of this process.

Figure 1. The Normandy Process, December 9, 2019

While fighting did not completely stop, and has not stopped to this day, the combatant forces generally respect the Minsk-established Line of Contact, although periodic raids across the line take place as well as shelling and sniper attacks. The Line of Contact has designated checkpoints for limited crossings of people between Ukraine proper and the rebel-held territories of Luhansk and Donetsk. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is mandated to observe and report on the implementation of the Minsk 2 Protocol.

A diplomatic/political deadlock ensued after the signing of the Minsk 2 Protocol. Essentially, the Ukrainian side under the government of then-president Petro Poroshenko differed in its interpretation of the sequence for the implementation of the specific protocols from those of the Donbas rebels and their Russian backers. Boiled down, the Ukraine side argued that rebel and Russian forces would first be required to withdraw from the Donbas territory and restore the border control between Donbas and Russia to Ukrainian authority proper, whereupon the Ukrainian Rada would pass special legislation enabling a decentralized status (i.e., semi-autonomy) for the Donbas, including provisions for the protection of Russian-language rights. This would then be followed by local elections in the Donbas under the OSCE's supervision. On the other hand, the rebels and Russians held that the withdrawal of forces and restoration of Ukrainian control over the border with Russia would occur only after the other protocols were implemented.
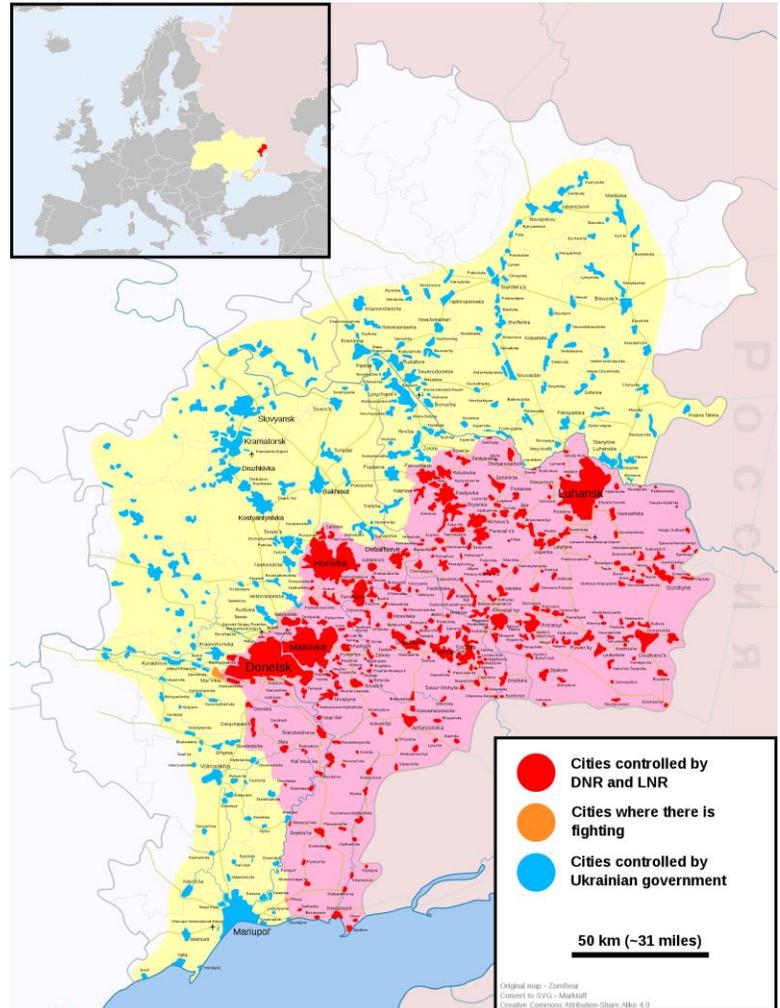
President Zelinsky at the Crossroads

In what initially appeared to be a ground-breaking election, Ukraine elected Volodymyr Zelinsky president in April 2019. Zelinsky's landslide victory, followed by equally successful Rada elections for his Servant of the People party in July, gave Zelinsky a commanding mandate to pursue his two key election platforms: dealing with corruption in Ukraine and seeking a peaceful settlement to the conflict in the Donbas.

On the peacemaking front, a flurry of activity soon took place with a successful agreement for a prisoner exchange between Ukraine and the Donbas rebels. Rising to prominence in these negotiations was Andrii Yermak who is the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine. Further negotiations led to a meeting of the Normandy Group in Paris in December 2019 to give renewed emphasis to kick-starting the moribund Minsk process. Zelinsky met face to face with President Vladimir Putin at a round table co-chaired by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Limited success was achieved in Paris with agreements to negotiate further prisoner exchanges, additional checkpoint openings along the Line of Contact, de-mining along the line and a general agreement to strengthen the implementation of the ceasefire which had routinely been violated.

In February, the Russians appointed Dmitry Kozak as Putin's special envoy to the Minsk process as the opposite number to Ukraine's Yermak. Contacts between Yermak and Kozak took place throughout the first part of 2020, giving rise to speculation that a possible deal under Minsk 2 might be in the offing. This in turn led to a backlash among the Western-leaning Ukrainians, particularly the nationalist spectrum of Ukraine politics centred in western Ukraine. It also caused concern among the Ukrainian international diaspora, including those in Canada.

Resulting demonstrations by Ukrainians opposed to settlement with Russia mounted. Some opponents held the view that any deal with the Russians, including Minsk 2, would be a

Cities controlled by DNR and LNR

Cities where there is fighting

Cities controlled by Ukrainian government

50 km (~31 miles)

Original map - ZomBear
Convert to SVG - Marktaff
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sellout. This view held that the only acceptable outcome would be Russian capitulation and a return to the status quo ante 2014: i.e., unconditional return of Donbas and Crimea to Ukraine. The argument was that Russian actions were a gross violation of international law which could not be condoned through a negotiated compromise of some sort. Negotiations in the second half of 2020 bogged down noticeably with the Ukrainian position looking very much like that which the Poroshenko government had previously taken.

The Crossroads at an Impasse and the Russia Factor

At the geopolitical heart of the Minsk Protocol is a Russian objective to achieve a negotiated Ukrainian neutrality and abandonment of its stated objective to join NATO and the EU. For the Russians, Ukraine is one important piece among several pieces in the puzzle of the post-Soviet space. While the West puts a premium on a liberal, rules-based international order, Russia puts a premium on a realpolitik sphere of influence-based international order.

In the Western narrative, the expansion of NATO and the EU eastward into countries that were once either members of the Warsaw Pact or the Soviet Union is a positive move to expand the sphere of a rules-based liberal order which in turns leads to democratic government, economic progress, stability and peace. From the Russians' narrative, this expansion across what they define as their sphere of influence and up to their own border is a threat to the order they have established following the Soviet Union's collapse.

The West has poured on numerous economic sanctions against Russia as a whole, as well as targeted sanctions against Russian individuals among the elite to punish the Russian government for its military actions in regard to Ukraine. The West expects these sanctions to inflict sufficient economic pain to dissuade Russia from taking action that violates the rules-based, liberal international order. Thus far this approach has not succeeded. The Russians have managed to sustain the overall strength of their economy through sanction substitution, which in part has strengthened the domestic Russian economy. The Russians have also diversified their international partnerships with other countries such as China.

As the Russians currently survey the post-Soviet space, in addition to Ukraine they must address developments in Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (specifically Nagorno Karabakh), and put their relations with Ukraine in that context. In the case of Belarus, the Russians are primarily concerned that it remain a close client-state ally. Their support or not of President Alexander Lukashenko is contingent on how this goal can best be managed. With Moldova, the Russians must manage relations with the newly elected president, Maia Sandu, who has advocated for stronger integration with the EU. The frozen conflict of the Transnistria remains an active file between Russia and Moldova. Similarly with Georgia, which continues to lobby for greater integration into the EU and NATO, the Russians are active in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The previously frozen conflict of Nagorno Karabakh flared up into a violent conflict once again between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the fall of 2020. A significant difference in this round of fighting was the overt support provided by Turkey to Azerbaijan. While Russia had been the adjudicator in the previous rounds of fighting, Russia now felt it needed to negotiate with Turkey on the resolution of the new fighting. Clearly, the balance-of-power relationship in this part of the former Soviet space has shifted, with Turkey now playing a role. While Russia managed to retain its overall influence, Turkish support for Azerbaijan's efforts to retake control over Nagorno Karabakh was respected in the peace settlement. Armenia was forced to accept a limited but important loss of territory in the enclave. The Russian military constitutes the newly formed peacekeeping force to enforce the new agreements, including the protection of the remaining Armenian-controlled enclave. Turkish military personnel are also on the ground as observers.

Internally, Russia is dealing with significant political turbulence. Looking at Russia and the Kremlin from the outside, there is speculation of internal power struggles among the ruling elite, in which Putin continues to preside as primus inter pares after 20 years of rule. This internal jostle was jolted significantly in early 2021 with the return of opposition figure Alexei Navalny from Germany. Navalny may be described as a "wow" factor in Russian politics. His imprisonment upon his return and consequent demonstrations orchestrated by his followers have created a particularly strong challenge to Russia's ruling elite. How this all plays out in the near term, leading to the Duma elections this fall, remains to be seen.

For the Ukrainian strategic calculus in dealing with Russia, particularly in the case of the Donbas and Crimea, the short- to medium-term analysis suggests the Russian position as currently constituted will likely be sustained.

The West and Canada at the Crossroads with Ukraine

On the Western side of Ukraine's push-pull equation, there is a continuing and robust EU, NATO and specifically Canadian policy of support for Ukraine's efforts at reform and Western integration. Ukraine has an association agreement with the EU and numerous assistance programs are in place with Western countries and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund.

Since 1994, Ukraine has been an active member of NATO's PfP, including participation in numerous peace-support operations as well as the war in Afghanistan. In 2020, NATO recognized Ukraine as an enhanced opportunities partner (EOP), which aims to maintain and deepen co-operation between Allies and partners who have made significant contributions to NATO-led operations and missions. Ukraine continues to lobby for an eventual membership action plan (MAP) as part of its aspiration to become a full member of the Alliance.

While Ukrainian membership in NATO remains a longer term prospect, five NATO countries have formed the QUINT format consisting of the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Lithuania and Poland to support Ukrainian defence reforms aimed to protect Ukraine's national interests.

Finally, Canada has been and remains among the strongest supporters of Ukrainian reforms and eventual accession to NATO. Canada's military assistance and training program with Ukraine was initiated in 1993 under the auspices of the Military Training and Co-operation Program (MTCP). Ukraine has consistently ranked first among program members and has benefited from a wide array of defence reform training and education in areas such as language, staff and peace support. In 2014, the Canadian military training initiative was greatly enhanced in light of the conflict in the Donbas and seizure of Crimea as part of Operation Unifier which maintains up to 200 Canadian military trainers in Ukraine.

Ukraine's Future Path on the Crossroads?

With all of the foregoing, Ukraine is determined to manage its own path at the crossroads of Europe. Reform and reduction in corruption benefit Ukraine for its own sake, and not just to satisfy requirements for aspirational membership in NATO or the EU. In terms of settling the conflict with Russia, Ukraine is challenged to make political choices on its future course along the crossroads.

At the time of writing, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that Ukraine was reconsidering its negotiating options with regard to the Donbas and said: "A bad peace is better than a good war."

This statement suggests Ukraine may be reviewing its negotiating position with regard to moving forward on regional autonomy/federalism and Russian-language rights in the Donbas as part of a reintegration strategy. A key stumbling block in the Minsk process is the sequence of the local elections, withdrawal of rebel and Russian forces and re-establishment of Ukrainian control over the border between Donbas and Russia. While these considerations are currently at the classified level, there was past public speculation of agreeing to a robust peacekeeping force under the auspices of the OSCE/UN to create a security zone in the Donbas to allow for free and fair elections.

Should there in fact be a renewed opening of negotiations under the Minsk/Normandy process, Canada is well placed to make a contribution to further such negotiations. Canadian experience in peacekeeping, federalism and language rights is a factor with the potential to provide pragmatic solutions to the issues at hand.

As for the Crimea situation, Ukraine is planning a long-term approach by hosting a Crimea Platform in August 2021 to give impetus to international pressure for the restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea. The success or failure of negotiating the Donbas question will likely have a bearing on the direction of the Crimea platform.

▶ About the Author

Andrew Rasiulis *completed his undergraduate study in Political Science/History at the University of Toronto in 1978 and received his Master of Arts from the Norman Patterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, in Strategic Studies in 1979. In 1979 Mr. Rasiulis was appointed a commissioned officer in the Canadian Forces Primary Reserve (Governor General's Foot Guards).*

He joined the Department of National Defence in 1979 as an analyst with the Directorate of Strategic Analysis, specializing in strategic politico-military issues pertaining to conventional forces. These issues included emerging concepts of conventional defence strategies for Western Europe, as well as the Canadian Government's efforts in the area of conventional arms control. In 1987, Mr. Rasiulis was promoted to Section Head, within the Directorate of Nuclear and Arms Control Policy, responsible for conventional arms control policy. He was also the Department of National Defence representative on NATO's High Level Task Force for conventional arms control from its inception in 1986 to 1989.

In June 1989 Mr. Rasiulis was posted as a Defence Advisor to the Canadian Delegation for Conventional Arms Control Talks in Vienna. Upon completion of his tour Mr. Rasiulis returned to National Defence Headquarters in April 1992 as Section Head responsible for policy on Central and Eastern Europe, including the Department's Military Training and Assistance Program (MTAP) with Central and Eastern Europe. In May 1996, Mr. Rasiulis was also assigned the responsibility of Programme Manager for the entire MTAP. He was subsequently designated as Director, Military Training Assistance Programme (and Eastern European Policy) in 1998.

Reflecting the growth of responsibility within the area of defence diplomacy, Mr. Rasiulis was re-designated Director Military Training and Cooperation in 2009. His responsibilities included the development of the policy for defence training cooperation with developing countries world wide, as well as overseeing its operational implementation.

Mr. Rasiulis' MA thesis, On the Utility of War in the Nuclear Age, developed a theory on limited conventional war. It was subsequently published as a Wellesley Paper in 1981 by the Canadian Institute for International Affairs and the Canadian Institute for Strategic Studies. He has also published numerous articles on conventional strategy, arms control and international military training cooperation.

Mr Rasiulis is retired from the Public Service and is now a freelance consultant with Andrew Rasiulis Associates Inc.

▶ Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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