

“Ukraine: a European challenge or local conflict?”

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Abstract :

In her presentation given at the Foundation on 2nd April 2015, Tetyana Ogarkova, lecturer at the Mohyla Academy Kyiv And coordinator of the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre (UCMC), explores the nature of the events in Ukraine and looks at the question of whether these present a challenge for Europe or whether they are a local conflict.

1 – A BATTLE FOR VALUES

The events in the Maidan were the expression of a conflict between European values, that are designed to be universal (recognised by Ukraine as freedom, equality, solidarity and human dignity) and the values advocated by Russia (paternalism, State values, conservatism). The conflict between the two systems of values is not geopolitical in the strict sense of the term. Russia, however has interpreted it as such since March 2014, with the “geopoliticization of values” and the annexation of the Crimea – as if there were different values opposing one another – Russian, European and others.

After the victory of Maidan in Ukraine Russian public opinion suddenly turned against Europe, seen as a decadent continent, with a decaying culture. In Russia’s eyes Europe is tolerant, Russia is powerful, Europe is adrift, Russia protects family values, Europe is degenerate, Russia has maintained all of its vitality. According to this new Russian ideology renaissance is only possible in a “Eurasian” context.

In response to the events in the Maidan Russia behaved like an aggrieved empire and annexed the Crimean peninsula. But this reaction which Russia presents as a form of defence, should be interpreted first and foremost as a direct attack on Ukraine [1].

Hence Russia’s project is neither rational nor pragmatic. What is its real strategy in the conflict? The annexation of the Crimea might find its original justification in the presence of military bases there but ulterior events in Donbass are not justified at all.

Russia is therefore basing itself on the myths of its historic grandeur and is nurturing “aggressive nostalgia”. Its strategy is to terrorise Ukraine and the European Union by a demonstration of its strength. A parallel might be drawn with the terrorist dynamic which indeed seeks to show strength and provide a show. These events reflect Russia’s determination to pass a message as a punishment to Ukraine and a warning to the rest of the world.

If Ukraine is experiencing an historic moment right now, Russia for its part is living in the past – in the nostalgia of the Soviet Union. Russia is trying to replay its history in an imaginary world in which historic time has stopped. One century after the separation of the State and the Church Russia is returning to the idea of “an orthodox civilisation”. Seventy years after the end of the Second World War it is bringing the demons of Nazism and Fascism back to life. A quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War it is still the “American or European conspiracy” fed by the Kremlin that is blamed for being the source of all of its problems. Russia visibly lacks ideas for the future – at a time when Ukraine is building its present and is aspiring to a future – Russia is simply rebuilding its past.

Ukraine is attracted to the European Union because of the values it defends. In Ukraine although the institutions often lag behind in terms of integration European values, we notice that these are spontaneously approved of. During Maidan the Ukrainians showed that they were prepared to die for *freedom*. Then after the annexation of the Crimea and the war in Donbass there was an immense voluntary

1. Since then, Putin has recognised that point publicly

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movement to help the displaced populations. This was true proof of solidarity between Ukrainians in the east, west, south and centre and this solidarity is all the more valuable since the displaced populations do not always hold “pro-Ukrainian” opinions. But the principle behind the work of the volunteers, who are mainly just ordinary citizens from all areas in Ukraine, is to help those who need it, irrespective of their political opinions. It is the principle of solidarity which enables hope for a possible reconciliation once the armed conflict is over. Today there are people and associations that can help take our State forward in a positive manner.

But Russia, the paternalist model, in which the State controls, cannot accept a “citizens’ Ukraine” nor a “Ukraine of values”. It was not by chance that several of the most active Ukrainian citizens were the targets of terrorist acts: volunteers in Kharkov, Odessa, and Dnipropetrovsk.

The Ukrainian crisis is not just a battle for values. It is no longer a local conflict either, since it represents a true danger for Europe although it seems highly unlikely that Russia will advance militarily into Ukraine or attack other European countries directly. Russia is becoming a real threat to Europe because of the various attacks it has made on the Baltic countries or diversions round the Ukrainian gas pipeline. An attack against the nuclear power plant of Zaporijia, the biggest in Ukraine could lead to a disaster comparable to Chernobyl which would cause innumerable damage in Ukraine but also across Europe. Hence given that the crisis is a real, direct danger for the West we can no longer speak of a local conflict but of a European challenge.

2 – SHOULD WE FEAR RUSSIA?

Why should we fear Russia? And why should we not be afraid?

The show of strength that Russia is trying to pull off in the Crimea and Donbass is supposed to frighten Europe, but primarily it is being used to cover up the Kremlin’s real weakness: its weakness in the

face of democratic elections, normal civil society, the freedom of the press, etc. Russia’s strength is its sublimated, phantasmagorical weakness – it is more imaginary and fanciful than real. It is just a façade.

Russia is trying at all cost to frighten Europe, but the conflict with Russia should not be feared simply because it is already underway – and it started with the annexation of the Crimea in 2014.

It is important to understand that today Russia is behaving like the USSR but it has neither the same resources nor the same means. It has no economic power; it only holds around 2% of the world’s wealth and its economy is ineffective and inefficient. It does not have the military power that the USSR had either.

However the real arm that Russia does have and that Europeans might fear, is the power of information. Today it is undertaking a real war of information to divide and paralyse the European Union from within. Its strategy lies in financing Russian media abroad (Russia Today, Sputnik) and parties on the far right. It is trying to divide populations and societies and spread the myth of its newly regained power.

Russian propaganda is trying to show that there is not just one reality but different interpretations (Russia, Ukrainian, European) – which are even contradictory depending on the audience. The Russians see it as a means to assert itself in the international arena and propaganda aims to convince the audience (including in Europe) that there is a reality from which the Russian dimension has been cut out. The European version however sees a direct threat in this mixed with a feeling of impotence.

Russia’s strategy also aims to nurture a feeling of guilt in Europe about Russia. But the West should not feel guilty about Russia, which does not even assume its responsibilities regarding its own people.

However, given this offensive policy to weaken the European continent led by Vladimir Putin, we should note that there are protest movements in Russia and in Europe and that a majority of Europeans are sceptical about Russian policy. For example in France 83% of the population say they do not trust the Russian leader.

According to estimates the Ukrainian conflict will probably last at least ten years, a generation even, but a collapse of Russia – like that of the USSR, is foreseeable and could happen very quickly.

• **DEBATE:**

-"the Ukrainians have two enemies: Russia and the State" What do you think of that?

It is normal for Ukrainians to be sceptical about the government. It is an extremely western and democratic reaction. At the same time we should note that the State has moved forward. When the parliamentary elections took place on 25th October 2014 new personalities entered Parliament including some fighters, activists, people working for NGOs. A new group of MPs came into being, the Euro-optimists. Some volunteers who have been helping the army from the start of the war joined the Defence Ministry.

-Russian propaganda has been introduced to discredit European integration. What kind of support is this given in the Ukrainian community? Are Ukrainians disappointed by the lack of European response?

The Ukrainians are not really disappointed by the European Union. Indeed they are disappointed because they think that the Europeans could have been more effective, but in no way does this play into the hands of Russian propaganda. Russia has lost Ukraine once and for all.

-The Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, was effectively elected afresh but many MPs from Viktor Yanukovich's party still hold seats. What is their position in terms of the conflict?

Viktor Yanukovich's departure was considered a betrayal by his voters. So today we feel that there is disillusion as well as fear associated with political persecution. One of these MPs, Mr. Chechetov committed suicide the day after Boris Nemtsov was murdered. Finally there is a large pro-European, pro-Ukrainian majority in Parliament today.

-What role has the Ukrainian oligarchy played in the conflict? What impact has the Igor Kolomoyskiyi affair had?

Igor Kolomoyskiyi is a Ukrainian oligarch who owns several Ukrainian media channels. He was the governor of the region of Dnipropetrovsk in the east – he acted in numerous ways to maintain the region within the Ukraine.

After his resignation as governor Petro Poroshenko declared war on the oligarchs on the grounds that the State can only be maintained if the oligarchs are removed. However this situation could degenerate and lead to a war between oligarchs which would be an even greater threat to the State. Given this conflict that is dividing society, as it opposes people who support the Ukrainian cause, the State absolutely has to take control back from the oligarchy.

-Has there been an effective withdrawal of heavy arms with the implementation of the Minsk Agreements?

A recent OSCE report has shown that the cease-fire has been respected overall. On the Ukrainian side heavy arms have been withdrawn to 25km from the demarcation line. On the Russian side however there has not been a withdrawal of heavy arms – they have just been moved. Information is not very clear since access by the OSCE experts has been rejected by the Russians.

-You maintained that Europe should not feel guilty about not taking action. Is there not a certain amount of naivety on the part of the European Union in believing that Ukraine, a former bastion of the USSR, might adopt European values as simply

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and as quickly as that? Indeed at present there is a major problem regarding corruption in Ukraine and in the Baltic State in general. Is it possible to introduce total transparency within the Ukrainian administration?

Indeed it will be difficult. Let's look at a real example. The question of the visa-less zone between the EU and Ukraine will not be on the agenda during the next European Council meeting on 25th and 26th June 2015 because the EU has indeed seen that Ukraine has been incapable of implementing all of Europe's requests. The country has had a deadline for several months in terms of proving its capacity for transparency. But when the deadline came and went, 19 points had still not been integrated. The Ukrainians are disappointed. Petro Poroshenko continues to hope that the decision taken during the next European Council meeting will be more political than pragmatic. However experts are somewhat pessimistic.

The other aspect of the problem is that Ukraine necessarily needs European and American pressure to counter internal corruption. For example in the Kolomoyskiyi affair and the oligarch war Petro Poroshenko needed the support of the European Union.

-Today the creation of a viable administration is required in Ukraine. How do you think the State can be rebuilt?

This is an essential question since reforms are difficult. Some reforms will be painful and there is a price to pay. Indeed it is difficult to reform without losing the political support of the population. But we have to remain optimistic ahead of these reforms because Petro Poroshenko is seeking effectiveness and results. The aim here is to move forwards carefully and at the same time reform without losing power.

Are the Ukrainian authorities aware of any social discontentment which might emerge in the upcoming local elections?

There is a major problem of the population's pauperisation: wages have been frozen whilst inflation and devaluation are galloping upwards. Many civil servants will be laid off which will increase the level of discontentment in the public sector. But for some time a new attitude has been emerging: if the displaced, who have lost everything – house, work, their place in society – can start from scratch – and there have been examples of this – if they can start up a company etc... then why can't a civil servant leaving a ministry be capable of doing the same? Production and exports have to be encouraged in order to save the economy.

-Are there any surveys or studies on social discontentment? Is this felt in the Ukrainian population?

To date there have not been any studies of the question of social discontentment. However we might note that there is a real communication deficit with the population on the part of the government. Indeed the Ukrainians see reality (for example rising prices) but do not make any causal links between events. Therefore it is vital to communicate with the population and explain what the different alternatives are.

-To what extent are women involved in the development of events in Ukraine?

Women have been very much involved since the events in the Maidan, as activists, doctors, journalists, cooks etc.. After the annexation of the Crimea women remained very much engaged. They are paying the human cost in the conflict by ensuring that life continues no matter what. Women are fighting too: we take the example of Nadia Savchenko, the former Ukrainian pilot who is on hunger strike.

A majority of volunteers are women. Artist Lesia Litvinova – film director and mother of four has become one of the best known volunteers in Ukraine: she is helping the displaced. Tetyana Rytchkova, a former business woman who lost her husband on the front in the summer of 2014 is another famous

volunteer who is helping the army. Her work was noticed by the Ministry of Defence and she is now an advisor.

-What contacts remain with the Crimea today? Is it still possible to communicate?

The Crimeans are mistrustful and are afraid of being picked out on the social media. They often change their name. People are still allowed to travel and Ukrainians do not need a special visa to go to the Crimea.

-What kind of pretext does Vladimir Putin require to launch an offensive against Mariupol again?

It is not very likely that Putin will attack Mariupol since he would not be able to capture the town without destroying it completely. There is a Rubicon that Vladimir Putin cannot or does not want to cross. His aim is to freeze conflicts, mediatise them and use them for show.

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