

## Ukraine and the Destiny of Eastern Europe

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April 1996 - Georgetown: "Why this rush of Central Europeans to NATO membership today? The Cold War is over, Russia is not an empire anymore..." The elderly tall man seemed irritated at my advocating in favor of NATO enlargement to the East... I was giving a lecture at an European studies seminar, organized by Charles Kupchan. "You want to tease and humiliate Russia as a revenge for the Soviet past," he repeated, rendering the NATO enlargement plan a conspiracy of Washington hawks and emotional Eastern European anti-communists.

I recalled this story the other day when Russian troops entered Crimea to punish Ukraine for its audacity to unseat a corrupt regime, blessed by the Kremlin. The arguments of Moscow leave no shadow of doubt: Ukraine has no freedom to act in accordance to its national interest, because it is part of "Russia's sphere of influence..." Kyiv is the Holy Seat of Russia's Orthodox tradition, and Ukraine's choice to belong to Russia was made in ... 988 AD with *knyaz* (prince) Vladimir baptized by Byzantine monks... Welcome - to an ill-forgotten fairy tale - to a world ruled by transcendent imperial glory where your lives belong to just the next Divine and Anointed one - a Vladimir again.

Ukraine is historically closely linked to Russia, but it's also part of Eastern Europe - an amorphous space locked into the legacy of four "great powers" of the past - the Russian, the Ottoman, the Habsburg and the German Empires. The Habsburgs vanished in the fires of World War One, and Germany is the major power of a new liberal and post-national Europe. The Ottomans rose from the dead into the Islamist neo-Ottoman project of Turkish PM Tayip Erdogan and his prophetic foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu... It's only the Russian Empire - that survived the longest in its replica of the Soviet Union. Now its heir - the Russian Federation - has to cope with the powerful imperial hangover that brings new pseudo-imperial projects to the fore - like Putin's Eurasian Union.

Ukraine - among other Eastern European nations - experiences not simply the alternative gravitational forces of the East and the West but also the clash between different epochs of European history. Present day Russia represents the strategic mentality of a mainstream 19th century great power, anxious about its "balances of power" with the outer world - and the West in particular. The geopolitics of Putin is a zero-sum game where winners and losers move territorial borders East and West. The clash is even more dramatic as Russia tries to



portray itself as a unique civilization – an alternative to the Western spiritual and moral decadence. Letting Ukraine join the European community on the other side of the civilization divide would equal treason - economic, geopolitical and spiritual.

Erdogan's Turkey is best mentally positioned to understand the Russian standpoint. Yet very few - if anybody - rush to join the Eurasian Union of Moscow, or the romantic neo-Ottoman project of Ankara. All former provinces of the late European empires attempt to join the European Union - a project that presently faces serious controversies and internal cleavages, but has proven successful in safeguarding European peace and prosperity after centuries of imperial competition followed by nationalist radicalism. Present-day Europe struggles to combine the legacy of national democratic revolutions that created modern sovereign nations with the imperative of post-national integration in the global age.

Ukraine is one of the last nation-building projects of Europe. The Soviet Empire arrested modern national development, and the present-day regime in Moscow tries to arrest it again within a new quasi-imperial project. Yet history does not operate on reverse gear. The post-Soviet space follows the same imperatives of modern national development which brought the ex-Soviet satellites of Central and Eastern Europe to NATO and EU membership. Postmodern Europe is not Eden, but it represents an attractive opportunity for the Eastern Europeans to cope with three most important tasks:

First, developing stable democratic systems of nation-building to replace the disastrous post-communist oligarchic rule.

Second, endorsing national sovereignty to evade the 19th century "great power" mentality and policy that treats smaller nations as obedient subjects within imperial "spheres of influence".

Third, employing a reliable model of modern economic and societal development to bypass the challenges of primitive and authoritarian state capitalism, practiced less successfully by Moscow and more successfully by Beijing.

Mr. Putin would not let easily those three priorities be realised by Ukraine. He'd rather stick to an option of weakening the nation-building process and long-term betting on a de-centralized model of clashing entities within Ukraine. He might enjoy tactical support by some Westerners who stick to treating Kyiv as a buffer zone between Europe and Russia. Yet history knows its course. Maydan demonstrated that clearly... The Red square in Moscow could easily follow.