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To cite this article: Hanna Shelest (2015) After the Ukrainian crisis: Is there a place for Russia?, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 15:2, 191-201, DOI: [10.1080/14683857.2015.1060019](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2015.1060019)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2015.1060019>



Published online: 27 Aug 2015.



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After the Ukrainian crisis: Is there a place for Russia?

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(Received 8 March 2015; accepted 26 April 2015)

Revolutionary protests in Ukraine in winter 2014 resulted in the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and an anti-terrorist operation launched by Kiev in eastern Ukraine. What was a totally internal manifestation of displeasure with governmental policy transformed into an international security crisis. While Kiev considers it a Russian–Ukrainian conflict, Moscow perceives it as a Russian–West confrontation, claiming that the crisis was provoked by NATO’s desire to enlarge into the region where Russia’s vital interests lie. The article analyses the sources of the current Ukrainian–Russian conflict and looks into Russia’s place in post-crisis Ukraine. As history has shown, even those states which used to fight each other for centuries managed not only to find peace but to establish constructive relationships. Still, with the shift from material to ideological confrontation, there are fewer and fewer options for compromise.

Keywords: Ukraine; Russia; Crimea; geopolitics; Black Sea; Ukrainian crisis; security

Introduction: the context of the Ukrainian crisis

To think of the current Ukrainian–Russian crisis as an exaggerated reaction to the Euromaidan protests in Kiev and the Ukrainian government’s decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union, indicates short-sightedness and overlooks the chain of smaller scale crises and problems which preceded and led to the confrontation of 2014–2015. Issues of gas supply and NATO enlargement have been more or less discussed and analysed frequently in academia and the policy community, usually from the realism point of view – making reference to national interests, spheres of influence and commercial rationality. However, issues such as perception of the common history of Russian and Ukrainian peoples, inability to present Russia’s greatness without the history of Kiev Rus, the role of language and ‘great Russian culture’ (mostly referring to the Soviet or at least Russian Empire – not to mix with the ethnic perspective) in Ukrainian society, have attracted less attention.

Using the term ‘Ukrainian crisis’ to refer to the whole course of events since November 2013 is not actually appropriate. The situation that emerged between November 2013 and March 2014, the so-called Euromaidan, can be called a ‘Ukrainian crisis’ as indeed hundreds of thousands of people stood against the regime of President Viktor Yanukovich demanding to stop corruption, to proceed

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with the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU, and with democratic reforms. Those events took place *in* Ukraine and were *about* Ukraine. The events following March 2014 are not anymore *just about* Ukraine. They are more about Russia's fear of a Maidan of its own, about exercising control in its 'spheres of interests and influence' and about contradictions between the East and the West, as perceived by Russia. The perception that the Euromaidan had been initiated by the United States (US) and that NATO's main concern is the deployment of its forces in the Crimea, is still overshadowing the decision-making logic in Moscow. While Ukrainians see the current crisis as an issue of democratic development, for Russia it is framed in geopolitical logic of world affairs. According to D'Anieri (2015, 234)

[e]ither geopolitical explanation would lead us to expect that Russia will seek to stabilize some revised status quo. The domestic explanation leads us to believe that Russia will seek to prevent any level of stability that enables a territorially truncated Ukraine to proceed with domestic reform and closer ties with Europe.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine is not over yet but the discourse about Russia losing Ukraine instead of bringing it closer has been going on almost since the beginning of the crisis. Ukrainian and Russian analysts alike have been attempting to predict the outcome of the crisis and what will follow after; still much will depend on how the crisis will end. Acknowledging the limitations of forecasting while the conflict is still developing, this article looks into the sources of the current situation and if there is a place for Russia in post-crisis Ukraine.

What preceded the Ukrainian crisis

Throughout the post-Cold War period, Russian politicians have been sending signals that NATO is 'taboo' and perceived as an aggressive military bloc whose expansion threatens Moscow's interests, while the enlargement of the European Union to the East was not posing problems. Moreover, 'from Moscow, Ukrainian politics was seen as identical to Russian – strong central authorities, effective consolidation and distribution of resources by the center, developed administrative apparatus and the most important – consensus of elites and society on national interests' (Сушенцов 2015). In reality, for many in Russia, it was difficult to see Ukraine as a separate sovereign entity with a more developed democratic political culture. Despite serious corruption and numerous political crises, Ukrainian civil society and politicians after the Orange Revolution behaved in a different way, not accepting power monopoly and authoritarian manners. The pro-European Union choice of many Ukrainians expressed the desire to bring fundamental changes to the overall development model of the country, first of all, in terms of democracy, human rights, economic development and fighting corruption. Thus, the choice of European integration was not a choice against Russia. Political competition among different Ukrainian parties and the diverse views within the parties on issues such as the EU and NATO integration did not allow for monopolization of public discourse on foreign policy. Even the ruling, at that time, Party of Regions had not consolidated its position as pro-Russian or anti-European, adopting legislation facilitating association with the EU; however, at the same time, spreading, for example, fake information on gay marriages legalization as a pre-require for EU visa liberalization (Kiev Post 2013).

Diverse views inside Ukraine on the country's foreign policy orientation were necessarily undermining its sovereignty. Thus, as Sherr mentions (2008) those who opposed integration with NATO dared not oppose the 'European course' while those who warned that Ukraine cannot be 'turned against' Russia dared not allow the Russian vector to become the determinant vector of their policy.

As for Ukraine's integration with NATO, this issue has not been on the agenda almost since the 2008 Bucharest Summit, when the Alliance rejected Membership Action Plans for Ukraine and Georgia, due to the active lobbying of Moscow against such a decision. In 2010, Ukraine officially rejected the NATO membership perspective by adopting a new Foreign Policy Doctrine and announcing the so-called 'non-bloc status'. Since then, the issue of NATO-Ukraine cooperation has been almost absent both in the academic and political discourse of the country. By the end of 2013, only 13% of the population was supporting membership of Ukraine in NATO (International Republican Institute 2014). Even after Euromaidan events, the new Ukrainian Government mostly agreed that membership was not on the agenda and an immediate application to join NATO was untimely. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the continuing fighting in Eastern Ukraine has changed Ukrainians' attitude towards NATO, and in parallel by intensifying cooperation with the Alliance – raised Russian suspicions to a new level.

Thus, Russian fears about the possible deployment of NATO military bases in Ukraine are not justified as there has been no consideration of such an option either in Kiev or Brussels. Even when Kiev had opted for NATO membership in 2008, there were not any discussions on the deployment of additional NATO bases in Ukraine or that the Russian fleet should withdraw before the end of its term (2017) as it had been agreed upon in 1997. Moreover, by 2014, nobody challenged the disputable prolongation of the Russian Black Sea Fleet deployment in Crimea until 2042, which was agreed in 2010 and had caused serious political disputes in Ukraine, perceived by opposition parties to be in violation of the Constitution.

According to Snyder (2014), by 2013, Moscow no longer represented simply a Russian state with more or less calculable interests, but rather a much grander project of Eurasian integration. The Eurasian project was based on two pillars: the creation of a free trade bloc between Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan; and the destruction of the European Union through the support of European far right political powers. This Eurasian project has not been articulated purely in economic terms, but ideas of joint cultural, religious and historical unity among Eurasian partners have been employed extensively. In the case of Ukraine, it was manifested in two ways. On the one hand, there has been marginalization of the role of Ukraine in the joint history, insistence by many in Moscow on its non-existing as a state and even artificiality of Ukrainian language and culture, presented as something like a dialect of Russian. Thus, the use of terms such as 'Small Russia' in reference to Ukraine has been extensive in main Russian TV channels. On the other hand, there have been systematic efforts in building the concept of a so-called 'Russian world', including the myth of the necessity to protect the use of the Russian language and the creation of a camp of pro-Russian politicians. To some extent, such a policy could be explained by the idea that the greatness of the Russian Federation, based on the Russian Empire glory and power of the Soviet Union, will not be possible without the ancient past of Kiev Rus, or Ukrainians' contribution to Soviet development. This is demonstrated in the arguments used by Moscow in favour of the Crimea annexation. In March 2014, the annexation of Crimea was justified by the

need to support the Russian population and the necessity to stop NATO forces' deployment in Crimea. But in December 2014, President Putin said that 'Crimea, ancient Korsun, Khersones, Sevastopol – all of them bear an enormous civilizational and sacral meaning for Russia, just as the Temple Mount of Jerusalem does for those who profess Islam and Judaism' (Schreck 2014) because Grand Prince Vladimir was baptized there in 988 AD after which Christianity came to Kiev Rus – almost two centuries before the first mention of Moscow appeared in chronicles.

According to Russian military expert, Pavel Felgengauer, Russia, is preparing for a new world war, which could happen by 2025. This is expected to be a war for resources where the US would be the main enemy. Because of this, there is a necessity for Moscow to establish a defence perimeter, and Ukraine is exactly part of such a perimeter. Losing Ukraine would mean that Moscow would be vulnerable to threats (Бологов 2015). Consequently, controlling Ukraine is seen by Moscow as a vital interest, for which the use of any means is justified. Along with statements in April 2008 by the Head of the Russian General Staff, Y. Baluyevskiy that Russia can use military and other means in case Ukraine and Georgia join NATO to secure its interests on the borders (Новости 2008), an article appeared in Russian media discussing a detailed plan of possible military occupation of Ukraine. Interestingly such military actions were called 'operation of liberation of Ukraine' (Джадан 2008). That article was widely circulated and perceived as provocative and a trial balloon, describing three scenarios of capturing Ukraine: occupation of Crimea; occupation of the Black Sea regions and East of Ukraine; occupying the previous regions plus Kiev. The detailed description of military forces and of strategic and tactical plans to be deployed led many experts to believe that this article had been elaborated at the offices of the Russian General Staff rather than being the product of journalistic work.

The current situation

For a long time, Ukrainian society has separated its perception of Russian citizens and of the Kremlin's policy. However, active involvement of Russian combatants and support of such involvement by Russian society has changed the perception of Ukrainian citizens dramatically. Slogans of the Euromaidan were not anti-Russian, but pro-European, perceived by most Ukrainians as not antagonistic to each other but complementary. However, the abrupt shift of the Ukrainian President's and government's opinion on the signing of the Association Agreement, perceived as the result of Moscow's pressure, made protestors use expressions such as 'Putin if you loves us, let us go', emphasizing the trigger for the Ukrainian government's policy shifts. It was not until Crimea's annexation and Russian citizens' total support of this action that relations between the two peoples, Ukrainians and Russians, gradually spoiled. According to D'Anieri (2015), one of the reasons of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, at least in part,

was to prevent the transnational spread of revolution from Ukraine to Russia. If post-revolution Ukraine were to succeed as a stable, prosperous, liberal democracy tied closely to Europe, this would fundamentally undermine the claim that Russia cannot succeed as a liberal democracy.

In 2009, Pifer (2009) in his Contingency Planning Memorandum 'Crisis between Ukraine and Russia' predicted two possible scenarios that could generate a crisis

between Kiev and Moscow in Crimea – one scenario was foreseeing the use of the Russian navy based in Crimea in actions against Georgia which would not then be allowed by Kiev to return; another scenario was foreseeing the escalation of the dispute on the terms and duration of the stationing of the Russian Black Sea Force in Crimea. None of these scenarios came true, as the world was faced with a third scenario; that of direct annexation of Crimea. In 2010, Buba (2010) wrote for *the International Affairs Review* that ‘[w]hile the Russo-Ukrainian dispute over natural gas has dominated international political discourse in recent months, it is Crimea that has the long-term potential to become a flashpoint for future conflict in bilateral relations’.

The Ukrainian Parliament adopted a decision recognizing the Russian Federation as a state-aggressor only in January 2015 despite having a legal right to name Russian actions as aggressive already by March 2014. According to the UN General Assembly resolution 3314 (1974), which states seven cases defining aggressive activities, including ‘the blockade of the ports or coasts of a State by the armed forces of another state’. Consequently, the blockade of the Ukrainian navy in Donuzlav Bay in March 2014 by sinking five Russian navy ships already could be considered as an aggressive act. Kiev took a slow path in reacting, and it is true that Crimean annexation could easily happen as the Ukrainian military were not able to respond appropriately, primarily due to the inability to comprehend that the enemy is Russia.

By cancelling the Budapest Memorandum, Russia lost its credibility in the eyes of Ukrainians in terms of security guarantees. Signed in 1994, even though just a Memorandum without any legally binding norms, the Budapest Memorandum was a symbol of respect of Ukrainian sovereignty and security in exchange for giving up its nuclear state status. In 2009, former US Ambassador to Ukraine, Steven Pifer, named Russian instigation or support of an effort by Crimea to break away from Ukraine as the worst – and most unlikely – case after which Kiev would appeal to Washington under the 1994 Budapest memorandum on security assurances, citing Russia’s threat to Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity (Pifer 2009). The Crimean case could be an ideal test for respecting obligations under this Memorandum, to which Ukraine was referring, but two of three signatories – the US and the UK were not able to react appropriately.

Even if the Crimean case was more about territorial claims based on historical memories of past Russian glory (Sevastopol as a city of the Russian navy glory), the Donbas region is a totally different case. It has never been associated historically with Russia, while support of the Russian-speaking population is only an excuse, as nobody violated their rights, and even more, the rural areas of Donbass are more Ukrainian-speaking. What Moscow aims at is the destabilization of this industrially developed region which would serve two goals. First, it could weaken the feeble Ukrainian economy, creating a deep crisis that would not allow the full implementation of Association Agreement with the EU. Second, it could destabilize Ukraine politically, as this region is the motherland of the former Ukrainian President V. Yanukovich. Evidence to the ‘non-necessity’ of the land bear is the total devastation of the critical infrastructure and industry that bring revenue to the local economy (in addition to the infrastructure that can be used by the military), and the number of mercenaries fighting there.

In the Kremlin’s view, Crimea should be a success story, which would bring more Ukrainians closer to Russia, and become an exemplary case of socio-economic

development and the so-called peaceful will of local populations to be with Russia. However, Crimean annexation has become a success story only in Russian domestic politics, raising V. Putin's rating inside Russia, but it remains a failure internationally and of course inside Ukraine. Respondents to the sociological survey made in the Odessa region in November 2014 noted a decline in pro-Russian sentiments due to the situation in Crimea. Respondents said that they 'began to assess more adequately consequences this all can lead to', and chose social stability over foreign policy orientation (Kribosheya, Serbina, and Shelest 2015). However, respondents expressed the view that

the cause of secession of Crimea is a result that for 23 years of independence, Ukraine has virtually ignored some regions, including Crimea, and if to project this situation to our (Odessa region) region, we are just in the same situation.

Therefore, there is a concern about possible social discontent there, as in Crimea.

For example, sentiments among the population of small towns and villages of the South of Odessa region are perceived to be pro-Russian or even 'pro-Putin'. This is mostly explained by economic reasons, as Russia was the main market for agricultural products, which are now losing out to the Russian market. Furthermore, on historical grounds, it was during the period of the Russian Empire that the allocation of land to the people of the region took place, at the time when serfdom was spread in other territories. The Soviet Union was a period of economic prosperity of 'Prydunavya' (Near Danube region), while during the last 20 years, it has transformed into a depressed region with ports being closed and significant deterioration of socio-economic situation. That is why residents of this region have considerable nostalgia for the old days that are automatically associated with modern Russia (Kribosheya, Serbina, and Shelest 2015).

The cities of Kharkiv and Odessa were perceived as next in a row of Russian aggression aspiration, or at least as those regions which would demonstrate the most pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian position. Military actions in Donbas calmed such pro-Russian sentiments, which were based more on cultural elements rather than politics. The attempts to destabilize two cities through socio-economic means, propaganda and often terrorist acts in winter 2015 have not been successful. Despite the fear that Odessa could be invaded from Transnistria by a Russian army aiming to unite all regions from Donbas to Transnistria via Crimea, this scenario, though it remains still on the agenda, has become less possible.

The Russian invasion has changed the internal discourse in Ukraine dramatically. The terms Russian (ethnically), Russian-speaking and Pro-Russian are referred to as three different notions, bringing the value of citizenship (Ukrainian) above ethnic background, as those which do not contradict one another, as it was before. Though the issue of the rights of the Russian-speaking population had been actively manipulated before, since 2014, the general approach has been one of 'we need nobody's protection', meaning that nobody violates their rights and this pretext should not be used as a reason for invasion. For more and more people in Ukraine, the Russian language is ceasing to be a part of their self-identification and close connection with the Russian Federation, which is more and more perceived as Kremlin and the concept of 'Russian world', rather than Russian culture and common history. In some way, pro-Russian sentiments today are another way of expressing pro-Soviet feelings, which oppose the European aspirations of Ukrainians.

At the same time, the Russian perception of the course of events is problematic. While Ukraine perceives this crisis as a bilateral one, i.e. Russian–Ukrainian, the Russian political and academic establishment presents it as a clash of interests of such key actors as Russia, the EU and the US, raising the importance of this interstate conflict to regional and global levels (Гущин and Маркедонов 2014). Thus, according to the Russian media, the Euromaidan revolution had been initiated by the West, just like the anti-terrorist operation, when regular propaganda took place. The Russian military and government were refusing to acknowledge the improving military capabilities of the Ukrainian army, claiming that a ‘NATO legion’ is fighting in Ukraine (Латухина 2015). The tremendous mobilization of the Ukrainian population and the de facto birth of the volunteering movement were the main pillars of support for the military that had been destroyed by the previous regime, while they facilitated the localization of the conflict in Donbas and triggered reforms, including in the security sector (logistics, training, management systems, accountability, etc.).

The current crisis violates all basic principles and norms of international law and practices. Even during the Cold War period, predictability in interstate affairs was higher, while the two superpowers tried to keep their policies within certain agreed-upon frameworks. Diplomatic efforts have been undermined by the supply of strategic missiles to irregular military groups, cases of journalists carrying weapons, reports on humanitarian aid convoys carrying non-humanitarian goods and not permitting checks by the Red Cross, ‘green men’ and military ‘on vacation’ in the conflict zones. As a result, parties to conflict and mediators speak different languages.

What the future holds

There are two main issues in the future prospects of the crisis and Ukrainian–Russian relations. One issue is possible scenarios for conflict resolution, and the second issue relates explicitly to the role Russia will be able to play in Ukraine after the crisis. It is interesting that most of the current literature ‘made in Russia’ is not about the future of Ukrainian–Russian relations, but about the future of Russia–West relations, which demonstrates both the non-acceptance of Ukraine as a subject of international politics and ultimately the root of the of the conflict. In Ukrainian discourse, the issues mostly raised are about the future development of the state itself, the evolution of its relations with the European Union while the crisis is not settled, as well as the future of Russian–Ukrainian relations both on state and society levels after the conflict. Therefore, when the questions are set differently, it becomes more difficult to find common ground. As Gustav Gressel wrote (2015) ‘The confrontation between liberal Europe and Eurasist Russia is not going to be a short-term affair, and it neither began nor will it end with the conflict in Ukraine’.

The crisis of trust has reached its highest levels. With regular violations of the ceasefire, an inextinguishable supply of weapons, the still-open Russian–Ukrainian border and Moscow’s denial of any responsibility, Russia is not seen any more in Ukraine as a reliable partner or counterpart at the negotiation table. Ukrainian attempts to attract and secure the presence of international actors in the conflict resolution process are motivated by two reasons. The first is to have a witness, a guarantor or a deterrent for more aggressive Russian behaviour. Second, it

constitutes an attempt to enhance shared responsibility for European security, persuading European partners that only by solving the Ukrainian crisis can Europe prevent further infringements. The paradox that exists here is that the West still prefers viewing the crisis as a purely Russian–Ukrainian conflict, while Russia sees it as Russian–West one.

In this situation, while the European Union at least took a mediation role, most Black Sea countries remained neutral. The low profile of Turkish involvement despite the violation of the rights of Crimean Tatars has raised questions in Ukrainian society. And while the passive reaction of Armenia and Azerbaijan could be expected due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, human rights concerns and complicated relations with Russia, so Georgia's ambiguous position also raised questions, as Tbilisi on the one hand, clearly condemned Crimean annexation, but on the other hand, did not impose economic sanctions against Moscow. As a result, the only Black Sea state on whose support Ukraine can still rely is Romania, which in the past was actually perceived as a counterpart, as there were concerns of possible Romanian territorial claims in Ukraine.

Russia does not necessarily need to seize more territory, but its aim seems to be preventing Ukraine from stabilizing. By freezing the conflict – and maintaining the potential for it to reignite quickly – Russia can ensure that investors shun Ukraine, that the government is distracted from other endeavours and that informal military forces retain their strength at the expense of the Ukrainian state (D'Anieri 2015, 239). Destabilization is thus attempted in several spheres – economic, energy, security and social. A renewed wave of active fighting is possible, but probably will be confined to the administrative borders of Donetsk and Lugansk regions. The annexation of Crimea has taught a lesson to Kiev and has obliged it to respond to aggression and remain on the defensive. Kiev's concern is that unless military resistance is put against Russian aggression, another incursion will happen.

Ukraine had been at the centre of what Stalin called 'internal colonization' (Snyder 2014), a policy still followed by Russia. Russia places Ukraine at the heart of its sphere of influence and considers it as an important element of its own integration processes, a factor, which guarantees the consolidation of Russian society and which rests on a thesis of shared history and shared historical memory (Гущин and Маркедонов 2014). Putin's own justifications of the seizure of Crimea repeatedly emphasize the need to protect Ukraine's Russian and Russian-speaking population from the 'fascist junta' in Kiev and to bring historically Russian, 'sacred' territory back into the fold (Motyl 2015). Such an approach makes negotiations difficult as it shifts the material conflict to an ideological basis. It is, thus, not about Russia's economic losses from the Association Agreement any more, but about taking back what once belonged to Moscow even if with disputable rights.

Another misconception among Russian experts is that today's mainstream attitude in Ukraine claims 'Ukraine for Ukrainians based on civilian nationalism and readiness to sacrifice territorial integrity in order to consolidate other parts of the country and to force disloyal population and regions out of Ukraine' (Сушенцов 2015). This misperception demonstrates an inability to comprehend that competition along political lines and ideologies in Ukraine may lead to political crisis, but does not mean the disintegration of the country. Moreover, the long history of Ukraine, during which some of its parts were separated and incorporated in different Empires and states, has produced high levels of tolerance and generated admissibility of diversity. Moreover, Ukraine for Ukrainians has never been a

political slogan in Ukraine, not even for nationalist parties, which Moscow is using to frighten western countries.

The manipulative position of many Russian experts is concentrated in the following statement: 'Thus in exchange for sanctions' suspension and taking away from the agenda the topic of Crimea, Russia will agree on the territorial integrity of Ukraine under condition of wide decentralization, probably with elements of the federal state ... ' (Гущин and Маркедонов 2014). So, following the logic of the Russian leadership, the Russian Federation is not a part of the conflict in Ukraine; however, it will follow the basic principles of international law – territorial integrity of the states – only in case this state and others will agree to change its internal organization and reject part of its territory.

Also, 'freezing' the conflict is considered by Russian experts a good option that allows it to control the situation without spending much money in support of the separatists' regions. At the same time for Ukraine 'freezing' the conflict is the worst scenario. The examples of protracted conflicts in Transnistria and Georgian regions are quite vivid and indicative of the negative implications, i.e. greater Russian political involvement in the breakaway regions and their further detachment from the central, legal government.

More and more parallels steadily appear in the discourse on the future of the separatists' regions in Ukraine, comparing them with Transnistria and Abkhazia. There is a common perception that maintaining the conflicts unresolved would give Russia leverage on Ukraine and its future, especially with regard to its foreign policy orientation. However, as Vadim Dubnov writes 'Separatists have not become a lever of pressure to Moldova and Georgia, because their mother states have managed to live quite well without those who separated' (Дубнов 2014). Both Georgia and Moldova signed Association Agreements with the European Union and strive for future EU membership. In the case of Moldova, the visa-free regime has been introduced despite the uncertainty of borders with Transnistria. So, it should not be expected that the current crisis will stop Ukraine's aspirations for closer cooperation with the European Union.

When discussing Russia's role or its place in Ukraine, the question should be divided into parts. Economic links between the two sides may be restored but it cannot be business as usual. The re-orientation of Ukrainian business towards the EU market, as a result of the current crisis and the implementation of the Association Agreements, will be inevitable. Still, the Russian market will be interesting for Ukraine, as well as cooperation in fields such as energy, transport and rocket-building. Evidence to the strong economic linkages between the two countries is the inability to cut energy supply from Russia and its long-term hesitation to apply economic sanctions on Moscow while demanding such an action to be taken by the EU.

At the same time, cooperation in the military and security spheres will definitely be limited. Such cooperation can be expected only in fighting terrorism and organized crime, selling military equipment such as missiles and their spare parts, cooperation in the framework of international organizations and conflict-prevention missions, like in Transnistria. All other spheres, including intelligence and joint training, might be restricted.

The arguments of Russian experts that Ukraine should become neutral again and reject NATO membership plans as a prerequisite for the resolution of the crisis and the reconciliation of both sides are beneath criticism. Four years of non-bloc/neutral status of Kiev did not prevent the current crisis occurring nor stop Russian

military involvement in Ukraine; thus, there are no guarantees that new concessions will be a safety-stop. Furthermore, in the same way that Poland was not asked to remain 'neutral' and become a buffer zone in the early 1990s, it should not be expected that Ukraine, the biggest European state, would undertake such a role submitting to the will of a neighbouring state.

As history shows, even those states which fought for centuries can manage not only to find peace but also to establish a constructive relationship, as Germany and France. The creation of the European Union was definitely one of the factors for such success. That is why despite all contradictions and fighting, there is always a chance for normalization of Russian–Ukrainian relations. The question is how quickly this will happen and on what conditions. As both states are not ready to sacrifice their fundamental principles – the right to freely devise national policy versus securing spheres of influence – it will be difficult to expect a quick solution to the Ukrainian–Russian conflict.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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