

*The Concept of Power in International Relations: Lessons from the Ukrainian Crisis*

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**Abstract**

Russia's ongoing political, economic and most disturbingly military involvement in Ukraine's internal affairs has shaken the world in general and the Eurasian continent in particular. Despite many differences of opinion, most Western scholars tend to agree that Moscow thus demonstrates its adherence to "traditional" concepts of power understood both as status and means of influence projection. The former argument relies on Russia's remarkably high status-awareness due to its relatively recent superpower experience and fear of perceived American hegemony. The latter one underlines its continuous reliance on hard power resources, reminding zero-sum, "spheres of influence" mentality of the late 19th century Europe. Although both these views seem to have much to do with reality, the "power discourse" surrounding the Ukrainian crisis usually mitigates the agency of another side of the conflict. Being one of the largest European countries, Ukraine not only is a potential middle power in its own right, but also presents a new ideational challenge to Putin's Russia, questioning the Kremlin's electoral legitimacy, Russia's European identity, its historical "anti-fascist" credentials, and perhaps most importantly its Russian-ness itself. Thus, although desperately lacking in "harder" (i.e. military and economic) power compared to the huge neighbour, present-day Ukraine contains important "softer" power resources, which might amount to a potentially crippling attack on Moscow's geopolitical vision and official identity projects with possible repercussions for its future stability. These insights would hopefully allow us to better understand both Russia's behaviour and the nature of changes within "power discourse" of theoretical and practical world politics.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, international relations, agency, power discourse, hard power, soft power

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## Introduction

The ongoing Ukrainian crisis is indeed of utmost importance due to both the actors and stakes involved. At the time of this writing, it is already safe to affirm that the issue is marked by three fundamental “firsts”: *the first internationalized military conflict within the traditional borders of Europe (i.e. outside South Caucasus) in the 21st century, the first annexation of another country’s territory in Europe since the Second World War, and the first truly significant confrontation between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War.* These and other features of the crisis have shocked both the international relations (IR) practitioners and analysts with some of the latter tellingly seeing in it the “unwinding of the post-Cold War order” (Menon and Rumer, 2015). Largely agreeing with this position, the current essay-like paper is composed as an attempt to reflect on the power-related discourse surrounding the continuing conflict in the middle of Europe with particular focus on none other than Ukraine itself which surprisingly has been “lost” within theoretical and practical narrative on the issue. It is hoped that *bringing Ukraine back* into the picture would advance our understanding of the reasons behind the crisis as well as its already present implications for wider regional and global security.

Among many definitions of power within theory and practice of international relations, there are two crucial ones in trying to explain the ongoing Ukrainian crisis. In a nutshell, power as a status or condition implies a certain identity that an actor possesses or attempts to possess. Power as a resource or means of influence projection, however, deals with rather more material features that it demonstrates to substantiate its claims. Based on this general conceptual distinction, the paper presents a consecutive analysis of the main academic positions on the interested parties within the crisis (agency), critically evaluates their main propositions, and highlights the Ukrainian power characteristics that largely continue to be surprisingly neglected, although being central to proper understanding of the ongoing conflict. The principal finding would thus state that *present-day Ukraine not only remains a potential middle power in its own right, but even more importantly presents a qualitatively new ideational challenge to the Putin’s regime built in 21st century Russia.* Although this issue indeed is of existential proportions to the Kremlin, the primary sources of it derive precisely from Ukrainian power and identity characteristics, rather than from the Western actors, despite the popularity of the latter position in Russian, American and European academic discourses. In other words, *one should not confuse the issue of Western (non-)military help to Kyiv with the fact that the crucial challenge to Russia comes from the Ukrainian state rather than its alignments.*

## Ukrainian Crisis *without* Ukraine: Academic Discourse on the Powers Involved

Besides outright conspiracy theories, there are two principal divergent Ukrainian crisis interpretations conveniently presented in some of the most comprehensive English-language monographs on the issue up to this date (mid-2015). Thus, Andrew Wilson (2014a) emphasizes Ukrainian internal dynamics by presenting the Euromaidan as a “people’s power” revolution against the corrupt regime of Viktor Yanukovich, and the subsequent war in the Donbas as popular resistance against revisionist hegemonic power of Russia. His British compatriot Richard Sakwa (2015), however, by mainly applying a structural-realist view, attributes the causes of the conflict to “multiplicity of power-centres” after the allegedly unfair ending of the

Cold War. As these positions would be briefly addressed later, suffice it so say here that in the latter book especially the Ukrainian agency has been subjugated to the Russo-Western relationship dynamics.

Surely, there are important qualifications to warrant such choices and positions. First, *Ukraine indeed has to bear the fair amount of blame upon itself for dismally failing to live up to its promises during the two decades period of post-Soviet independence*. Sakwa, for example, goes as far as in fact outlining two different crises, the “Ukrainian” and the “Ukraine” ones, with the former focused on the contradictions of this country’s nation- and state-building projects since independence. Ukraine’s repeated comparison with neighbouring and in many ways similar Poland would only strengthen these sentiments. One certainly needs to have in mind, however, that this kind of negative comparison was probably among the main drivers of those who stood and died for their beliefs during the revolution. Contrary to Sakwa’s statements, *the Euromaidan indeed had a substantive enough vision of the empowerment of people at its heart*. One only needs to address a multitude of interviews with its direct participants to become sure of this.

Second and perhaps more importantly, the above-mentioned and many other Western scholars are writing about the Ukrainian crisis having in mind both their auditorium and responsibility for their words. Thus, *the whole very complex issue in question is being presented primarily through the relationship between the West and Russia*. Notably, the subtitles of Sakwa’s and Wilson’s books emphasize “the crisis in the borderlands” and its meaning “for the West”, respectively. Either putting more (Wilson) or less (Sakwa) blame on Russia, they both are West-relational in principle and essence. Surely, these contributions are outstanding compared to the notorious and sadly rich academic tradition of representing our case study in such terms as “divided”, “unsustainable”, “improbable” etc. This position perhaps most prominently was pronounced by late Samuel P. Huntington who described Ukraine as a “cleft country” in one of his most controversial works (1996), and by Zbigniew Brzezinski who (in-)famously put it on his “grand chessboard” as the figure that would transform Russia (1997). Present-day big names in IR studies also share this position which added to their (over-)emphasis on theory would produce rather questionable results, represented by John J. Mearsheimer’s (2014) unmistakable accusations to the West for entirely causing the crisis, or many others more or less openly calling for Ukraine’s “finlandization” (e.g. Walt, 2015), as if the Cold War had never ended in the first place and USSR had not ceased to exist. Some scholars, creatively applying post-colonial approaches, with good reason call these interpretations of the Ukrainian crisis “orientalism reanimated” (Belafatti, 2014).

To reveal the Ukrainian agency within both the conflict and its solution, there is a need to address the power-related dynamics of other actors involved. Russia would be a natural choice to start with. Despite many differences of opinion, most Western scholars tend to agree that during the crisis Moscow has demonstrated its adherence to “traditional” concepts of power. The former argument relies on Russia’s remarkably high status-awareness due to its relatively recent superpower experience and fear of perceived American hegemony. The later one underlines its continuous reliance on hard power resources, reminding zero-sum, “spheres of influence” mentality of the late 19th century Europe. There is, however, a huge discord in vindicating these positions and actions. On the one hand, Russia is perfectly understood and called a

“normal”, rather than “revisionist” great power (Götz, 2015). This line of thinking is usually associated with geopolitics, emphasizing Ukraine’s “borderland” position locally and Russia’s refusal to submit itself to Atlanticist dominance globally (Sakwa, 2015; Tsygankov, 2015). These premises more often than not lead to surprise results as for example stating that the Kremlin was “at most only tangentially responsible” for the crisis (Sakwa, 2015).

On the other hand, there is a position that Russia is an unmistakably revisionist and opportunist power which only understands strength and views any Western weakness as an opportunity to exploit (Kramer, 2015). According to this line of thinking, the Kremlin acted in Ukraine because it could. This was partly a consequence of European division and economic weakness as well as US strategic retrenchment. Russia, however, itself suffered from the “power schizophrenia” that rested on the desire to be both liked and feared by the West (Lindley-French, 2014) as well as from the “world’s biggest persecution complex” (Wilson, 2014a) both of which only made matters worse.

I would argue that these widely diverging views should be validated by emphasizing the differences between kind and degree while trying to answer two extremely important questions concerning the Ukrainian crisis. Let us deal with these by first measuring the degree of relevant variables. The first question asks *whether present-day Russia is a revisionist power?* The status-related answer would focus on its role perception in the contemporary global and regional strategic environment. As all analysts would at least agree that Russia is a *post-superpower state*, one probably needs to look first at its relationship with the Soviet past. Sakwa curiously maintains that during the breakup of the USSR its largest component federal republic and socio-political core was sharing the victory with the rest behind the crumbling “iron curtain”. This was definitely the feeling of many Russians and especially liberal-minded ones, but looking at the country’s current political leadership’s rhetoric and actual policies one would find unmistakable signs of pro-Soviet and even pro-Stalinist whitewashing. Thus, the sheer degree of present-day Soviet super-power references and allusions would definitely indicate “phantom pains” deeply entrenched within both the political elites and the society. Contrary to what Sakwa claims, *the Cold War has indeed ended in a defeat, “cold” though it was*, and calling Poland and the Baltic states “militantly revanchist powers” in this context is rather odd, especially having in mind Russia’s recent methods of influence projection.

Actually, the means-related answer is a more appropriate one in this particular case. The Russia-friendly view would underline the reactive nature of its actions. The Crimean “episode” is side-lined to such a degree that one of the most blatant violations of international law both during and after the Cold War is presented as “preventative”, “natural”, “understandable” or even “legitimate”. Then follows *the paradox of de facto defenders of the spheres-of-influence mentality with its specific post-Soviet version of Russia’s special entitlements blaming the West and regional states for “sticking to the Cold War thinking”*. The obvious question from many opponents of this view would be: if Crimean annexation is not a revisionist behaviour, then what is? Notably, even though both sides pinpoint Russia’s many internal contradictions, challenges and weaknesses, the former apparently search for “compensations” for these, as though Eastern Europe in general and Ukraine in

particular are somewhat responsible.<sup>1</sup> Hence, *the degree of Moscow's actions would put its current political manifestation in an even higher position in terms of revisionism than its direct Soviet predecessor during the Cold War.*

The second question then logically follows the first. It asks about the degree of Russia's military (hardest form of power) involvement in Ukraine and might be rephrased in the following manner: *to what degree is the conflict a civil war?* The answer to this question is usually focused on the Donbas insurgency side-lining the Crimean issue altogether, thus precisely conforming to the Kremlin's agenda. In that sense, the takeover of the peninsula amounts not only to a "democratically implemented rectification of historical injustice", but also to the actual "saving of it" from the ravages of "civil war". Opponents of this view point to the lies behind all the principal Moscow's justifications for the annexation, i.e. its "eternally Russian" history, alleged persecution of ethnic Russians, the Kosovo analogy, and the "referendum's" democratic essence (Motyl, 2014). In reality, the sheer swiftness of Crimea's takeover suggests that contingency plans had been in place (Götz, 2015). The additional "NATO threat" justification was semi-officially applied later, when the Russian authorities apparently became aware of this position's relative popularity among Western politicians and scholars.

The Donbas, however, was the place that Ukraine opted to fight for. Much has been written about the region's popular choice in Russia-sympathetic accounts, conveniently neglecting the lack of reliable recent opinion surveys and the fact that instability was mostly instigated by "protest-tourists" coming from Russia, and later insurgency commanded largely by Russian citizens. The Kremlin justified its subjects' participation in the war as an "independent personal choice", initiating a crackdown, however, on a fair number of Russians who went to fight for the Ukrainian side, rather than against it. The "Kievan fascist junta" was then accused of indiscriminate killing of civilians, ignoring the fact that insurgents were constantly waging their artillery attacks from civilian areas, and conveniently disregarding natural comparisons between the methods used and results achieved during the Ukrainian "Anti-Terrorist Operation" in Donbas and Russia's own "Counter-Terrorist Operation" in Northern Caucasus.

The most controversial issue, nonetheless, is Russian regular forces' participation during the conflict. Today it has already become safe to conclude that Moscow has been providing the insurgency with military equipment, intelligence data and artillery cover-up in frontier areas throughout the whole period of contingencies. The "Russian onslaught" topic omnipresent in the Ukrainian discourse, however, is a more nuanced one. The units of Russian regular forces were actively participating in the contingencies during the crucial events, probably starting with a sudden reverse of rapid Ukrainian advance in August 2014. Russian regular servicemen captured by the Ukrainians were either dismissed as "lost" during the drills on Russia's territory or renounced as being "currently resigned" from its military and security forces. With time passing by, the Kremlin's "hybrid warfare", so successful in Crimea though it seemed, becomes more and more akin to a historically pretty familiar growing participation in a classic proxy war (Wilson, 2014a). Suffice it to conclude that *if the war in Donbas is a "civil war" it is one of not only Ukraine, but Russia as well,*

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<sup>1</sup> The reverse argument would be plausible though.

though luckily not on its soil. Indeed, despite many Ukrainians' rather understandable current rejection of the objective Russian connections, there are lots of ethnically and linguistically Russian Ukrainians and a decent number of Russian citizens fighting for the governmental forces in Donbas.<sup>2</sup> This fact has become one of the main sources of Ukraine's soft and potentially hard power against its foes.

Let us briefly deal with the most powerful Ukrainian friends or "allies", as perceived by Russia. The European Union (EU) naturally comes first due to the background of the whole conflict. Widely held as a "normative power" and even awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, it indeed has crucial implications for both Ukraine and Russia. Analysts differ on the EU's exact threat perception for the latter, with some saying that it is understood as a potential great-power centre in the making (Götz, 2015), or alleging that its Eastern Partnership is presumed to be a "Trojan Horse" for the expansion of Western values in general and NATO in particular (Tsygankov, 2015). In fact, a rather original, but nonetheless interesting position states that the enlargement of the EU poses a far greater threat to the Kremlin than NATO, precisely because Russia is struggling to understand new sources of power in the 21st century (Lindley-French, 2014). The Ukrainian crisis further strengthened *the paradox of Eastern Europeans in many senses being more Euro-optimist than the "old Europe"*. Wilson (2014a) is especially vocal in claiming that Ukrainian revolution might be understood as a reminder of older and more vigorous continent. According to him, Ukraine that knows much more about Europe than vice versa, sacrifices blood for its "values", while the EU is unwilling to sacrifice its purse. Russia, on the other hand, is trying hard to sow discord within its institutions by actively supporting Euro-pessimist radicals on both the left and right and using personal connections with many member-countries' economic and political elites.

It is, however, the US that apparently looms large in Russia's rhetoric surrounding the crisis. Moscow is especially vocal by disseminating accusations of Washington's involvement as a penalty for both countries' recent differences across many other issues, ranging from Edward Snowden affair to Syria. The EU is rhetorically challenged with accusations of being mere "clients" or "hostages" of Americans. On the other hand, *both the Russian political elite and population apparently are satisfied with Washington's new attention, reminding them the Cold War era when the principle of "fear means respect" was largely guiding their foreign policy and strategic thinking*. Although talking a lot about America's "revanchism", "strategic fatigue" and "absolute decline"<sup>3</sup>, Russia can barely withstand its "smart power" of financial sanctions (Wilson, 2014a). *Its much lauded shift to the East remains to be a wishful thinking at best, and even if successful would amount to a grave security threat due to rising power asymmetry with Asian neighbours in general and China in particular*.<sup>4</sup> The Ukrainians are closely following this rhetoric being quick to remind *the irony of Russia supposedly fighting America on Ukraine's soil by killing "brotherly" Ukrainians*. Let us explore their position in detail.

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<sup>2</sup> The same is true of the protests on the Maidan in both 2004 and 2013-14, as affirmed by Sakwa.

<sup>33</sup> As opposed to a relative one which very much represents today's global geostrategic realities due to (re-)emergence of new power centres with China being the primary among them.

<sup>4</sup> As was observed in my doctoral dissertation "The Clash between China's and Russia's Interests of Regional Hegemony in the 21st Century" (2014).

## The Ukrainian Agency: an Existential Threat to Putin's Russia?

To start with, it is important to understand that *the Kremlin is indeed right in viewing Ukrainian revolution's threat to itself precisely due to socio-cultural similarity and geographic proximity between the two*. However, *it is dishonest in two vital respects: first, by blowing up the "fascist" nature of the challenge, and second, by switching the regime interests with those of the state*. Despite its huge potential, Ukraine is no match for Russia in terms of overall economic and military power. As Sakwa (2015) maintains, the country indeed was effectively locked in a developmental stalemate during its independence, and the Orange revolution failed to break the deadlock. However, he is too quick to similarly dismiss the results of the Euromaidan, and curiously fails to notice Russia's disruptive role within these processes. Although being a remorseful middle power failure, Ukraine continues to have some edge over Russia in terms of military technology and diversification of economy. But *its true potential challenge, nevertheless, rests on tremendous "softer" power resources* as would be successively shown below.

Ukraine's ideational rather than material threat to the Kremlin rests on the fact that *Ukrainians are unmatched Russia-watchers and Russia-experts*. Long suffering from a neo-colonial sort of minority complex within a supposedly common Russia-led Orthodox East Slavic world (Kappeler, 2014), the Ukrainians not only were slow to build inside and publicize outside their national and state identities,<sup>5</sup> but also became intimately knowledgeable of Russia's cultural, social, economic and political realities. Post-Soviet Ukraine's identity build-up is reasonably criticized for being too conflictual and exclusive, but I would argue that the crisis turned the issue for the better rather than for worse as often claimed by Ukraine-bashers. In fact, *for the first time it was the issue of ethnic Russians that proved to be a double-edged sword for the Kremlin*, as Ukraine's "state identity" finally began to trump ethno-linguistic divisions with many Russophone and even Russophile citizens unifying against a common very peculiar threat.

Marléne Laruelle (2014) has recently explored the pro-Russian term "Novorossiia"<sup>6</sup> as a live mythmaking process orchestrated by three different nationalist circles to justify the Donbas insurgency. The corresponding ideological paradigms, i.e. "red" (Soviet), "white" (Orthodox), and "brown" (Fascist), however, can only partially explain active participation of non-Slavic fighters within the ranks of separatist forces. Although the motives of ethnic Chechens or Buryats for military involvement apparently differ on a case-by-case basis,<sup>7</sup> the Ukrainians were quick to notice *the irony of non-Slavs defending the "Russian World" in the ongoing "Russian Spring"*<sup>8</sup> *against Slavic Ukrainians, many of whom actually are ethnically and/or linguistically Russian*.

Indeed, ever since one of the so-called Crimean "green men" with characteristically East Asian appearance admitted on camera of belonging to Russia's regular military

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<sup>5</sup> Obvious in the still popular English-language Russophone references of "the Ukraine" instead of "Ukraine" or "Kiev" instead of "Kyiv".

<sup>6</sup> Literally "New Russia".

<sup>7</sup> More on this in my forthcoming article "Between the "Russian World" and "Yellow Peril": (Re-)Presentations of Russia's Non-Slavic Fighters in Eastern Ukraine".

<sup>8</sup> Here "Russian" has an ethno-linguistic (*russkiy*) rather than a state-based (*rossiyskiy*) meaning.

forces back in March 2014, the non-Slavic militants have been both specifically highlighted and mocked at by the Ukrainians who thus challenged the Kremlin's official position on its involvement in the hostilities, and half-jokingly developed the image of a new "Yellow Peril" yet again arriving from Asia to destroy the "cradle of Eastern Slavic civilization". These popular narratives should not be taken for simple Ukrainian ethno-centrism or racism.<sup>9</sup> Rather, *they serve the triple purpose of denouncing Putin's hidden motives and open propaganda,*<sup>10</sup> *validating their European "civilizational choice", and unifying their diverse society against common and well-known "barbaric" enemy.*

This last "orientalization" of the external threat additionally provided a "safety net" to many Ukrainians who (sub-)consciously refused to see the foe among their "Russian brethren" residing under the Kremlin's "yoke". In this case ethnically Russian citizens of the "aggressor state" are being portrayed as deceived by the somewhat almighty and absolutely evil figure of Vladimir Putin, thus conveniently forgetting that big brother mentality and Ukrainophobia are widely entrenched within the Russian society, even despite (or more controversially because of)<sup>11</sup> the huge number of Ukrainian descendants there. This *personification of guilt in the Russian president*<sup>12</sup> is also related with other identities of his state ascribed or questioned by the Ukrainians. For them, Putin is no different from Adolf Hitler, and his country's actions are fascist in both nature and deed. Russia's much lauded "anti-fascism" then becomes even more cynical, reminding Winston Churchill's often-quoted phrase about future fascists disguising as its opponents.

For Euromaidan supporters, Putin's Russia continues to be closely identified with Yanukovich's Ukraine. Their revolution thus was directed not so much against the figure of the-then president, widely hated though he was, but against the corrupt, incompetent and irresponsible oligarchic power framework.<sup>13</sup> Putin's guilt hence lied not that much in supporting the ultimately ousted colleague, but actually in representing the source and powerful ally of this same model known in his country as the so-called "power vertical" or simply the "system" (Wilson, 2014b). *To many more or less sympathetic Ukrainians the neighbouring state was hijacked by the propaganda-savvy and cynical KGB/FSB operatives, outrageously calling their own post-revolutionary and even post-electoral overwhelmingly civilian, less nationalist-represented government "junta".* The Kremlin's much more persuasive argument of an anti-constitutional coup against democratically elected government in Ukraine, however, was countered with claims about the breakup of the social pact with the

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<sup>9</sup> Those doubting should consider the fact of many Crimean Tatars and Chechens currently fighting for the Ukrainian cause. These fighters apparently enjoy much acclaim and respect within both the larger society and members of the military-security establishment, not excluding the marginal nationalist radicals.

<sup>10</sup> This line of argument was literally followed by Simon Ostrovsky, an Emmy-award winning journalist for VICE News, who using open-access photograph service in Russian social media traced the path of an ethnically Buryat Russian regular soldier to and from the war in Eastern Ukraine.

<sup>11</sup> It is curious to notice that within the Russian political and socio-economic spheres the Ukrainian family names (most ending with -o or -uk) usually go together with some of the most extreme and openly propagandistic comments about the post-Yanukovich Ukraine as if these people have something to prove to their country's authorities or themselves. The opposite trend is represented by much less voices with rock-musician Yuri Shevchuk being perhaps the most prominent one.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps most clearly symbolized by the (in)famous chant of the Ukrainian football (soccer) fans.

<sup>13</sup> Even having in mind the painful post-revolutionary period of largely failing hopes.



people (Motyl, 2014), and the overthrown elites' criminal acts ranging from blatant corruption to violent suppression of the entirely peaceful Euromaidan activists first and killings of their openly belligerent supporters later.

The natural subsidiary Ukrainian response was based on questioning the legitimacy of the Kremlin itself, especially emphasizing the recent electoral cycles there that had been widely recognized as unprecedentedly rigged even by low Russian standards. The Ukrainians were obviously aware that within a new "conservative values project" built to increase the Putin system's popularity after post-2012 legitimacy crisis, it was they that this time served the quasi-internal enemy role created by political technologists to unite the Russian population behind their strongman (Wilson, 2014b). Ukrainian humorous defiance to counteract their neighbour's often impertinent propaganda deserves particular mention. Indeed, many of them quickly embraced outrageous labels largely created and propagated by the Russian media, willingly calling themselves "butchers" (*karately*), "ukrops",<sup>14</sup> "(zhydo-)banderites"<sup>15</sup> or junta members to further ridicule opponents. It remains to be seen how effective all these methods truly were.

## Conclusion

To conclude, there are several principal power-related lessons from the Ukrainian crisis. First, *the academic and official discourse employing the term in the area of international relations itself is a manifestation of power*. In the case under analysis, it was surprisingly none other than Ukraine that suffered most, by being semantically neglected at best and subjugated to Russia at worst. Obviously, appreciation of the Ukrainian agency is of prime importance in order to both understand the crisis and find sustainable solutions to it.

Second, *Ukrainian choices indeed are of existential importance to Russia, but stressing the interests of the regime or the state would lead to different conclusions about the nature of its impact*. If the latter is presumed to be more important, Moscow should ill-afford serious confrontations with its culturally and economically close and potentially prosperous neighbour. Rather, it acted in a classically revisionist and aggressive manner which already has caused serious harm to its own power ambitions with highly probable even more negative repercussions in the future due to radically changed perceptions about it in both the larger part of international community and the "emerging" Ukrainian state. Russia's behaviour during the crisis thus amounted to opting for short-term gains for the regime, rather than long-term power achievements for the state.

Third, *many IR commentators and practitioners should not award Russia power advantages that it does not objectively possess or deserve*. They are well advised to finally get over the break-up of the USSR which gladly for us all was *defeated* without much blood spilled. Furthermore, it was defeated for a very good reason of being unsustainable, repressive and corrupt. One remains surprised of popular views that Russia should be somewhat compensated for the breakup of the USSR, rather than criticized for ever-increasing attempts to revive many of its elements. Even if

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<sup>14</sup> Supposedly offensive distortion of "Ukrainians", etymologically close to the word meaning dill plant.

<sup>15</sup> Strange combination of anti-Semitic moniker with notorious title since the Soviet period used to describe Ukrainian nationalists (according to a divisive figure of Stepan Bandera).

one remains convinced that this country suffered unjustifiably, why its Eastern European and post-Soviet neighbours in general and Ukraine in particular are designated to pay the bill.

Fourth and finally, although being a potential middle power in its own right, Ukraine *presents a qualitatively new ideational, rather than purely material, challenge to Putin's Russia*. Intimately aware of its neighbour, it questions the Kremlin's electoral legitimacy, contemporary Russia's European identity, its historical "anti-fascist" credentials, and perhaps most importantly its Russian-ness itself. These "softer" power resources might amount to a potentially crippling attack on Moscow's geopolitical vision and official identity projects with possible repercussions for its future stability. Indeed, in many ways the "civil" nature of the war in Donbas extends beyond Ukrainian borders to Russia, while scapegoat-like Putin-bashing leaves some space for eventual "awakening" among the "deceived brethren". The success of Ukraine's resistance, then, depends not only on the Western and regional support or Russia's own preventive challenges, but also on the results of its inclusive state-identity project which is not only necessary, but also possible and according to many signs<sup>16</sup> already in the making. Although the killing of a leading Russian liberal figure and anti-war activist Boris Nemtsov along with Moscow's resistance to the creation of international tribunal to investigate the shooting down of Malaysian airliner further discredit the Kremlin, Ukraine can ill-afford to continue the "race" of which would socio-economically and politically collapse first. Neither is it in Russia's national interest to follow this path, though many continue to think otherwise.

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<sup>16</sup> The legal crackdown on the radical right-wing organizations is already in place, while Ukraine is trying to attract Russia's many dissidents not only to support it, but to actually come and help in its reforms.

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