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Invasion of Ukraine

More About Nationalism than Geopolitics

By Atilla Demko

SYNOPSIS

What led to the war in Ukraine is not just the country's drive for NATO and EU membership. Other Central and Eastern European nations joined both organisations suffering only verbal protest from Russia. The war in Ukraine is about much more than cold geopolitics; it is a war between Russian and Ukrainian nationalism.



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COMMENTARY

THE ESSAY by Frederick Kliem of 15 March 2022, *Joining EU, NATO: Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (RSIS Commentary/CO22024) made some interesting observations. He started with a strong claim that “In retrospect, NATO’s eastern expansion was a mistake”. If we look at the main drivers behind the current invasion of Ukraine, we might end up with a somewhat different conclusion.

NATO’s eastern expansion had started in 1999, and even the last two members, Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020, joined without a grave international crisis. In the case of Montenegro there may have been a Russian inspired coup plot, but beyond that, there were no Russian reactions even vaguely comparable to the invasion of Ukraine.

Realities of Geopolitics

Dr Kliem points out rightly that disregarding the realities of geopolitics is unwise, and sympathy is not good policy. NATO expansion, however, was sound until it reached the tripwire of not only Moscow’s geopolitical and military sensitivities but core Russian nationalist beliefs.

We cannot say that the Ukrainian-Russian war, and a Ukrainian civil war within that, is simply a “realist” type of power conflict. While realist calculations are there, nationalist beliefs are even more important.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is indeed directly linked to Ukraine’s drive to join the European Union and NATO. The 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests in Kyiv had started after President Viktor Yanukovich suspended preparations for signing the Ukrainian-European Association Agreement.

President Yanukovich, who originally supported the agreement, did so under serious Russian pressure. Russia’s main problem, however, was not Ukraine’s association agreement with the European Union, but the drive of the Ukrainian opposition, supported by only a minority of Ukrainian voters, to join NATO.

The country was deeply divided on NATO, with 46% of Eastern Ukrainians seeing NATO as a threat in 2013, and only 3% as protection. Western Ukrainians had exactly the opposite perceptions. So both Russia and a very large minority of Ukrainians saw NATO as a threat before the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and the start of the Donbass war. That conflict, unresolved for eight years, ended up with the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Russian Nationalism

Without understanding Russian nationalism, and the difference between the culture of Western and South-Eastern Ukraine, there is no understanding of the war in Ukraine. Russia and some pro-Russian forces in Crimea and Donbass reacted with such ferocity to the victory of the 2014 Euromaidan protests because of the deeply held beliefs of Russian nationalism.

The belief, that Crimea and South-Eastern Ukraine are part of the Russian world, and

Ukrainian NATO (and EU) membership would create a wall between Russians on the two sides of the border.

As Russian writer and Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn put it in a 2007 interview, the spread of NATO's influence "was especially painful in the case of Ukraine, a country whose closeness to Russia is defined by literally millions of family ties among our peoples, relatives living on different sides of the national border. At one fell stroke, these families could be torn apart by a new dividing line, the border of a military bloc".

There was no similar cultural, historical and economic closeness in any other country that joined NATO before. Only Estonia and Latvia had sizeable Russian minorities, but they were settled to the Baltics mostly during the period of the 1945-1991 Soviet occupation.

Ukraine is Different

While Crimea, Odessa and Kyiv mean a lot to Russian nationalism, Tallinn and Riga — the capitals of Estonia and Latvia respectively — mean little, if anything in comparison. Budapest, Prague, Zagreb or most other "new" NATO capitals mean absolutely nothing to Russian identity and self-perception.

Simply put: Vladimir Putin and Russian nationalists can easily imagine a future Russia without the current members of NATO and EU, but cannot imagine it without Ukraine, or at least Crimea and South-Eastern Ukraine.

Very little of this has anything to do with military strategy. The Estonian town of Narva, inhabited by an ethnic Russian majority is only 150 kilometres away from the second city of Russia, St. Petersburg. Still Russia accepted Estonian NATO membership. With a lot of unease, a lot of rumbling and even provocations, true, but without a preventive war or the formation of serious unrest within the sizeable ethnic Russian population of Estonia.

Ukraine in NATO: Only if Russia Falters

As of 2022, NATO officially recognises three states which have formally expressed their membership aspirations: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine. From these three, it is clear that only Bosnia and Herzegovina can join the alliance as it has no territorial disputes with Russia.

Georgia, but especially Ukraine, is well beyond the tripwire of Russian sensitivities. Ukraine can join NATO and even EU only if Russia falters one day. There is of course no assurance, that it will ever happen. Ukraine unfortunately will remain between a rock and a hard place for a long time.

In retrospect, it was a mistake to promise a future membership to Ukraine and Georgia as the move provoked the worst instincts of Russian nationalism while the West could not defend these new potential NATO members.

At the same time, it was wise to include Baltic, Central European and Balkan countries,

nations that strengthen the collective West, and now bear much of the burden of the rearmament drive in Europe.

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