

The Ukraine Crisis: A New Division of Europe?

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Currently, the question of a new division of Europe is high on the international agenda. How could this have happened, what are the underlying root causes of this development and what steps may be taken to ease tensions and improve the strained relations between the political West and the Russian Federation? From my point of view, a new division of the European continent is not merely a question, but a matter of fact. With its annexation of Crimea and its at least indirect military interference into sovereign Ukraine, Russia violated major principles of international law and the post-1989 European peace order. Moreover, as a consequence thereof, Western countries imposed political and economic sanctions on the Russian Federation. Furthermore, NATO officially declared Russia to be a danger to European security and has suspended for the time being its strategic partnership with the Russian Federation established in 1997. The real question is: will the new division evolve into a

long-time, structural change or is it still possible to achieve some kind of cooperation between Russia, NATO and the European Union once again? In this article I will argue that the underlying root cause of the Ukraine conflict is a security and integration

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dilemma. This dilemma is based on very different perceptions on both sides. For the majority of Western countries, NATO and EU enlargement were and still are a strategy to stabilize and develop those states joining the Western communities. From a Russian point of view, enlargement is perceived as encirclement. To find a solution for the ongoing conflict, both sides need to better understand the respective perceptions of the other party. As a consequence, it is necessary for them to overcome their zero-sum thinking by creating win-win solutions.

To understand the present escalation of tensions in and around Ukraine, it seems useful to go back to its roots and understand that its “cause at the strategic level was the failure of the post-Cold War European and Euro-Atlantic institutional architecture to achieve its stated aim of creating a Europe that was whole, free and at peace.”¹ At the beginning of the 1990s, in the immediate aftermath of the East West conflict, for a few years there had been a realistic chance to establish a new Pan-European security order based, in particular, on the framework of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Especially then German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and other Western and Eastern leaders favored such political development. That open window had closed for three reasons:

- the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact;
- the declared wish of most Central and East European countries to join NATO;
- the decision of the US, Germany and NATO, based on the two above mentioned facts, to alter their policies inviting new members to the Western alliance.²

NATO enlargement had been discussed in the process of the 2+4 negotiations leading to German unification. To be precise: there had never been a legally binding agreement or provision stating that NATO must not be enlarged in the future. However, there had been a political understanding of the German, Soviet and US leaders of that time that such enlargement should not occur.³ In addition, the political environment had been a different one compared to that years after. Ukraine and Georgia were part of the Soviet Union. During a visit to Kiev in mid-1991, US President George Bush

publicly declared that he would like to see Ukraine as part of a reformed and modernized Soviet Union, not as an independent state.

For German leaders such as then Chancellor Helmut Kohl, it was obvious that NATO enlargement, as initiated in 1994, may only be implemented in accordance with the Russian Federation or at least without its strong opposition.⁴ At several high-level occasions, Kohl characterized NATO enlargement as a coin with two sides: membership for Central and East European countries on the one side, a politically significant, strong and stable institutionalized partnership with Russia on the other. The NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security, a legally binding document concluded in 1997 was a result of that two-track approach.⁵ In the provisions of that document, NATO pledged not to “permanently” deploy any “substantial” number of troops on the soil of the new NATO member states.

Only two years later, in 1999, the Kosovo conflict and NATO’s military intervention without any previous authorization by the UN Security Council severely damaged NATO-Russian relations.⁶ The US and NATO decided to act unilaterally. Russia was not *part of that game*. On the contrary, Russia was perceived as an obstacle to necessary urgent decisions. In the aftermath of their military intervention, Western powers sought the support of Russia to accomplish a negotiated settlement and invited the latter to participate in peace-keeping efforts. However, those endeavors to tackle the deep-rooted Russian anger did not succeed. From a Russian perspective, the Kosovo issue was a negative landmark event in its relations with the West and NATO in particular. Since 1999, Russia has interpreted the so-called strategic partnership with the Western alliance as a construction without substantial meaning: “There was too little understanding of Russian ‘political psychology’ and its ‘imperial phantom pain.’ After the end of the Cold War, too little attention was given to the question of Russia’s place in the European security order.”⁷ The majority of Western countries did not accept Russia as a partner on an equal footing. Even worse, in the light of its military superiority, the West did not comply with international law and neither respected international

institutions nor Russia's prominent position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.⁸ For the majority of Moscow's elite, NATO-Russian partnership was dead.

Another two years later, since 2001, the George W. Bush administration shifted US foreign policy priorities. George Bush Senior and Bill Clinton did not perceive the Russian Federation as a potential enemy but a (difficult) partner. In general, both presidencies worked hard to maintain a good relationship with Russia. Their endeavors were complemented by corresponding policies of leading European powers, especially Germany and France. Bush Junior was not interested in real cooperation with other major powers. To him and his administration, stronger and better relations with Russia, as proposed by Russian president Vladimir Putin (since 2000), did not carry any value and priority on their strategic agenda. Instead, the Bush administration perceived Russia as a potential competitor or rival. From the Bush administration's world-view, all competitors, Russia, China and the EU alike, had to be contained in order to preserve the US position of power as *second to none*.⁹ In certain special cases, even *roll-back policies* were adopted. Until 2001, due to Russian core interests, NATO enlargement was, with the exception of the Baltic republics, restricted to countries outside former Soviet territory. Bush was not prepared to respect Russian interests — or the skepticism by major European allies. His administration invited former Soviet republics like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and, last but not least, Ukraine, to join the Western military alliance.

The early Putin administration — as well as his predecessor Yeltsin — had proposed forms of cooperation but in return only received disregard or, even worse, confrontation. From a Russian perspective, the United States defined its relations with Russia no longer in terms of a win-win framework but as a geopolitical zero-sum calculation. In the following years, Russian president Putin tried to strengthen relations with West European key players like Germany and France. A fundamental strategic re-orientation, for instance towards the Far East, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a *renversement des alliances*, did not occur. Russia perceived the US and NATO as adversaries, re-built its military,

strengthened its relations with emerging powers like the BRICS states, but at the same time remained open for closer cooperation with the West. For a short period of time, President Obama's *new start policy* towards Russia eased tensions and opened up a limited window of opportunity to restore a more stable relationship. From a Russian perspective, Western military interventions in Libya (2011) and (more covert) in Syria (since 2011) had closed that open window once again. Quite contrary, Western powers perceived Russia and its veto right in the UN Security Council as a major stumbling-block to search for international solutions to international problems. At least since mid-2011, *new start* has been an issue of the past.¹⁰

And here we are at the core of the present conflict. From its beginning in the mid-1990s, but especially after the Kosovo war, NATO (and later EU) enlargement have created a security dilemma on the Russian side. According to John Herz¹¹ and Robert Jervis,¹² a security dilemma is referring to a phenomenon in which “one state's gain in security is inadvertently threatening other states”.¹³ Many of the steps pursued by states to heighten their security frequently have the unintended effect of making other states feel less secure. A specific type of security dilemma, the integration dilemma, arises as a result of competition among different economic and political-military integration initiatives. Such integration dilemma occurs when one state perceives the integration of its close neighbors into military alliances or economic blocs as a threat to its own security or prosperity.¹⁴ Exclusion is the source of the dilemma: “It transforms integration, a positive-sum process by definition, into a zero-sum game for the state that is excluded from the integration initiatives offered to its neighbors. As with the security dilemma, the neighbors' intent or the proposition of integration initiative supporters need not be hostile to the state in question for an integration dilemma to materialize. Indeed, one state's dilemma turns into the cause of inter-state conflict as a result of the predisposition to making worst-case assumptions about the motives of other states. Such assumptions can lead to recurrent rounds of escalation — a costly spiral of action and reaction in the context of little or no communication (and confidence building,

M.S.) between rival parties. Under the conditions of the integration dilemma, the leaders of rival blocs both increasing their efforts to induce or compel a country to join their respective groupings and increasingly lash out at one another, diminishing trust between them. The negative impact of rivalry is increasing as competition continues to rise.”¹⁵ This is exactly what happened when the Bush junior administration pushed hard for Georgia’s and Ukraine’s admission to NATO. That process was halted by Germany, France and Spain in April 2008, when they opposed further steps in this direction. To the Obama administration, NATO enlargement was not very high on the agenda and in its first years, as discussed earlier, it even favored a *new start* of its relations with the Russian Federation. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the year 2014, NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine was a topic of only secondary or even tertiary significance for most Western decision-makers. Dependent on Russia’s future policy towards Ukraine, this may change in the years to come.

The case of European Union enlargement is different. As a surprise to many observers, the European Union has been perceived as a strategic competitor or rival by the Russian leadership for a number of years.¹⁶ Even worse, “in the eyes of Russian leaders, EU expansion is a stalking horse for NATO expansion.”¹⁷ This perception was the direct result of the so-called *Eastern Partnership* launched by the EU in 2009.¹⁸ The partnership is an invitation to six former Soviet republics to closely cooperate with the EU: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The purpose of this initiative is to tie these countries closer to the European Union but without a membership perspective. However, the association agreements (“Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement”) prepared by the EU Commission are very detailed. The participating countries are required to make sufficient domestic progress in order to fulfill EU standards. In response to the *Eastern Partnership*, Russia founded its own organization, the *Eurasian Customs Union* together with Belarus and Kazakhstan. Armenia joined the organization, too. In 2015, the profile of integration will be upgraded and a new, more demanding and comprehensive *Eurasian Economic Union* will be founded. Russia’s community-

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building policy may best be characterized by labeling it *strategically defensive*. From its point of view and not without any justification, the Eastern partnership initiative is not in favor of Russia since all former Soviet republics in Europe are developing closer ties with the EU than with Moscow without any derived benefits for Russia. The first cooperation agreement

between the EU and the Russian Federation, signed in 1994, expired a number of years ago and a new agreement is not in sight due to the conflicting positions of the two parties on a number of issue areas.

From my point of view, it is an open question whether a simultaneous membership in both the Eastern Partnership and the Eurasian Economic Community will be possible at the same time. A lot of difficulties have to be addressed, yet such a solution seems to be feasible.¹⁹ It seems to be remarkable that at no point in the negotiations, the EU Commission was genuinely prepared to discuss such an outcome, especially with respect to Ukraine. On the contrary, leading EU officials like the President of the commission José Manuel Barroso strongly opposed any proposal to explore any kind of *dual membership*. This critical assessment of EU negotiating strategy is confirmed by various politicians, e.g., former EU Commissioner Günter Verheugen, until 2009 in charge of EU enlargement, and current Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimko, who played a leading role in EU-Ukrainian negotiations on the association agreement.²⁰ It is noteworthy that the European Union supports regional integration efforts in every part of the world but not on the territory of the former Soviet Union. To sum up, it is obvious that the most important goal of the European Union was to incorporate Ukraine and the other states of the *Eastern Partnership* into its sphere of influence without trying to create any win-win solution with Russia, the great power neighbor. For the second time within three years, the European Union acted without strategic foresight, following its poor performance with respect to the rebellions of the so-called Arab spring since 2011. It underestimated the Russian opposition, failed to establish

a common ground with the Russians, and was not aware of the necessity of close and sustainable communication with its important Eastern neighbor.²¹ Additionally, until the situation escalated in autumn and winter 2013/14, Ukraine had not been very high on the agenda of national capitals, including Germany, where a new coalition government had been negotiated at that time. In addition, then foreign minister Guido Westerwelle had been perceived as a *lame duck* and *caretaker* because his party was not re-elected into the German parliament.

The rest of the story is well known. Ukrainian president Janukovitch decided not to sign the EU association agreement, protests in Ukraine grew and escalated. A French-German-Polish EU troika negotiated an agreement allowing early presidential elections, but the opposition on the streets of Kiev did not accept that outcome. The elected president left the country under irritating circumstances. A new leadership was established following a *coup d'etat* containing “four high-ranking members who could legitimately be labeled neofascists”.²² The new government neglected the interests of the Eastern part of its country populated largely by ethnic Russians; Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Republic that declared its independence only a short time before and Russian-sponsored separatist forces fight in Eastern Ukraine. Moreover, Western countries imposed sanctions on Russia in order to change the direction of Russian foreign policy. To Russia, however, national prestige seems to be more important than the well-being of its economy, at least in the short run. The crisis in Ukraine developed from an internal divide into a fully-fledged international crisis and one of the most demanding challenges to the European architecture of security and cooperation since the end of the Cold War in 1989. The question is: how to escape the escalation spiral and how to find solutions acceptable for the major parties involved? To address this question properly, it is necessary to discuss the core interests of the conflicting parties.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia perceives Ukraine as a “sister nation” with strong linguistic, cultural and historical ties with its big neighbor. In addition, Russia regards Ukraine as part of its own geopolitical sphere of influence.

Therefore, it is interpreting any effort by Ukraine to further integrate towards NATO and EU as a threat to its security and economic core interests “just short of national survival.”²³ Following the political upheaval in Kiev, Russia is confronted — at least according to its own point of view — with the risk of a significant loss of control. The transitional government in Kiev hardly signaled its willingness to cooperate. Hence, President Vladimir Putin, by supporting both the secession of Crimea and separatism in eastern Ukraine, adopted a strategy of destabilization in order to ensure long-term access to the strategically important peninsula in the Black Sea and — if possible — to change the prevailing power relationships in Kiev as well. The Russian leadership is well aware that there will not be any pro-Russian government in Ukraine for some time to come. Taking into consideration the modified setting which operates to Russia’s detriment, Putin achieved some sort of optimum result in both political and territorial terms. This claim is supposed to justify neither Russia’s actions nor the support for Putin by a large majority of the Russian population. It remains true, however, that Putin, by tolerating and accepting the political upheaval in Ukraine, would have forfeited his domestic leadership qualities as the architect of a strengthened Russia.

Moreover, the respective decisions and developments during the crisis in Ukraine were preceded by a Russian “deviation” from the West. That is to say the expectations and concrete objectives of both the Russian and the Western side proved to be compatible with one another only to a very limited extent. Even worse, President Putin deteriorated employment and fulfilment prospects of opposition members and civil society at large time and time again and the value gap between Russia and the West is widening further. The Russian president, in his speech on the integration of Crimea, again referred to the long list of related conflicting issues: the war in Kosovo 1999, the independence of Kosovo 2007, the development of the US missile defense shield in Europe without or even directed against Russia, NATO enlargement, overstretch of the UN-mandate with regard to the intervention in Libya 2011, and unilateral intervention threats vis-à-vis Syria 2013.²⁴ Against this background, the upheavals in Ukraine have been interpreted as

some kind of smokescreen created by the West. It may be argued that, without the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine, Russia would not have responded in the same confronting manner, as it has been the case. In every case, its “response to events ... has been defensive, not offensive.”²⁵ However, in that precise moment, Putin gave priorities to a geopolitical great power strategy and national prestige at the expense of Russia’s strong and unimpaired economic linkages with Europe. Hence, from an objective point of view, Russia is harming its own interests since its behavior does not only endanger its economic fundamentals resting on energy exports but also limit its foreign policy options and possible partnerships.

The United States has not caused the crisis in Ukraine. Yet, it certainly is using the latter to its own advantage. The crisis in Ukraine is providing the US with a unique opportunity to weaken Russia’s international standing, to position itself as a crisis manager in Europe and to change the balance of power between NATO and EU in NATO’s favor. Moreover, the common interests of the US and EU with respect to the crisis in Ukraine were able to cover the deep mistrust following the disclosures of Edward Snowden on US global surveillance strategies vis-à-vis its allies, at least temporarily. In line with its pragmatic approach, the Obama administration would like to keep open the option of a new understanding with a then weakened Russia. The European Union, in contrast, does follow multiple objectives with regards to the crisis in Ukraine. It is in favor of a politically independent Ukraine with a sound territorial sovereignty while preserving the cooperative security order in Europe and preventing any new continental divide. Likewise, in the aftermath of the crisis’ escalation, the EU is eager to be perceived as a unitary actor speaking

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with one voice only. In so doing, the EU tries to give additional emphasis to its dual response, a combination of dialogue offers, sanctions (and threats thereof) and to facilitate its common position vis-à-vis the US. Therein, Germany and the German government started to assume a leading role, pursued in close coordination with France and Poland. Besides a general consensus of the EU Member States on the most central objectives, their interests are differing on other less central issues. Whereas the Eastern Member States generally support a “harder line” vis-à-vis Russia, Germany, France and other Western Member States seek to utilize all possible means to prevent Russia from pursuing its policy of intervention. The aim of this policy is a new mode of cooperation with the big neighbor.²⁶

Since the end of the East-West conflict, reunited Germany is engaging with the Russian Federation within the scope of a strategic partnership. Accordingly, during the past 23 years, Germany has repeatedly supported an increased and deepened integration of Russia towards Western institutions such as EU, NATO, G7 and G8. Until the crisis in Ukraine, Germany was the most important supporter of legitimate Russian interests in the West.²⁷ At the same time, the Russian leadership used to continuously regard the Federal Government of Germany as its most significant Western partner apart from the US and at times even ahead of the latter. Increasing economic interdependencies, the appreciation of the Russian/Soviet contribution to German reunification as well as the reconciliation of the people of both countries in the aftermath of the World War Two atrocities were at the very heart of the good relations. Despite the fact that differences in opinion between both countries have increased during Putin’s second presidency, this did not affect the aforementioned postulations. Consequently, Germany does not have any kind of interest in a new division of Europe: “In Germany, a containment strategy and a shutdown in relations with Putin would be a non-starter not only because it would abandon the country’s long-standing reluctance to use economic levers for political purposes in its dealings with other states, but also because of Russia’s geographical proximity and the Ostpolitik legacy of engagement over confrontation.”²⁸

In any case, a quick and easy solution to this international crisis is not in sight. It will require a lot of time and political endeavors to restore trust between the conflicting parties. Unfortunately, “Russian and Western leaders are preparing their publics for confrontation, not compromise.”²⁹ The following three proposals may be capable of promoting the dialogue process that is urgently needed:

- (1) Economic and political stabilization of Ukraine is urgently needed and is a major prerequisite to find long-term solutions to the root causes of the crisis. The ceasefire agreed upon by the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists on September 5, 2014 may pave the way for a political settlement, including a high degree of autonomy or a Home Rule Government of Eastern Ukraine. Close and joint cooperation should be placed even higher on the agenda to address the poor state of Ukraine’s economy. Due to the fact that Ukraine’s economy is dependent on the European Union as well as the Russian Federation, the participation of both players in a constructive way is inevitable for a successful outcome. An interim agreement on Russian oil and gas supplies, Ukrainian payments and European guarantees is a necessary first step to avoid further economic decline and human suffering during the upcoming winter months.
- (2) Ukraine holds the freedom of choice whether to associate itself with the European Union or not. For the time being, it is only this *European decision* that is supported by a majority of the population. That does not imply EU membership or a *membership perspective* in the foreseeable future, but close cooperation with the European Union as a cornerstone of Ukraine’s foreign policy. The other cornerstone is the future security status of the country itself. As a result of the Russian intervention, NATO membership is supported by more Ukrainians than before but not by a majority. From a European perspective, it is highly questionable whether a Ukrainian NATO membership would actually strengthen the alliance. In such a case, tensions with Russia would grow and any partnership with that country prevented. The best way

out of the dilemma would be a non-aligned status of Ukraine as an integral part of its constitution guaranteed by major powers like the EU and Russia.³⁰

- (3) A fresh start of the relations between Russia, the EU and the US is necessary. The three parties will need a certain time to evaluate the present crisis, re-define their interests and to get ready for a new arrangement. As a matter of fact, European security is not feasible if being directed against Russia or without it but only in close cooperation with Russia. Additionally, any security arrangement has to be based on general principles accepted by all participating parties. Considering the present international agenda, common interests between the *political West* and Russia are more important than any diverging views. A new partnership, at least in the beginning, will be much more limited and pragmatic than the *strategic partnership* designed in the 1990s. This would be the preferable and most rational choice. It is however possible that other, worse scenarios will materialize. In any event, confrontation would be very costly for every party involved.

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4 Cf. Wolfgang Ischinger, "Baumängel am gemeinsamen Haus (Construction deficits of the Common House)," *Internationale Politik*, Issue 3, 2014, pp. 19-21; Helmut Kohl, *Aus Sorge um Europa. Ein Appell (In Concern about Europe. An Appeal)* (Droemer-Knauer Verlag) 2014, pp.103 ff.

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10 Cf. Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

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12 Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Issue 2, 1978, pp.167-214.

13 *Ibid.*, p.170.

14 Cf. Samuel Charp and Mikhail Trotskiy, "Russia, the West and the Integration Dilemma," *Survival*, Issue 6, 2013/14, pp.50 ff.

15 *Ibid.*, pp.50-51.

16 Cf. Kian Kottke, "Die EU und Russland. Barrieren auf dem Weg zu einer stabilen sicherheitspolitischen Partnerschaft (The EU and Russia. Impediments on the Way Towards a Stable Security Partnership)", in Michael Staack ed., *Europa als sicherheitspolitischer Akteur (Europe as a Security Actor)*, Leverkusen: Budrich Publishers, 2014, pp.103-123.

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18 Cf. Lawrence Freedman, "Ukraine and the Art of Crisis Management," *Survival*, Issue 3, 2014, pp. 17 ff.

19 Cf. *ibid.*, pp.58 ff.

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22 Mearsheimer, p.80.

23 Charap, p.230.

24 Kremlin, Address by President of the Russian Federation, March 18, 2014, available at: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6889>.

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26 Cf. Stephen F. Szabo, "Germany's Commercial Realism and the Russia Problem," *Survival*, Issue 5, 2014, pp.117-128.

27 Cf. Andreas Rinke, "Wie Putin Berlin verlor (How Putin Lost Berlin)," *Internationale Politik*, Issue 3, 2014, pp.33-45.

28 *Ibid.*, pp.124-125.

29 Charap, p.230.

30 Cf. Henry A. Kissinger, "How the Ukraine Crisis Ends," *The Washington Post*, March 6, 2014.