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Clashing Civilizations in Modern Ukraine

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In his book "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order," influential American political scientist Samuel Huntington claimed that clashing cultural and religious identities would be the main source of conflict in the post-Cold War world. His ideas are unexpectedly useful for analyzing the current crisis in Ukraine.

Initially, those in Kiev who advocate a sharp break with Russia were the ones to cite Huntington's ideas. Their logic was simple: Russia and Ukraine are two different civilizations — the former is the center of Russian Orthodox civilization and the latter has always gravitated toward Western civilization. Therefore, they argue, Kiev's desire to integrate with Europe is a natural process.

That position might sound sensible enough, but its advocates either misread Huntington or are deliberately distorting the truth. The problem is that the fault line of civilizations lies not between Ukraine and Russia, but within Ukraine itself.

It is important to remember that modern Ukraine is a product of its Soviet past and that, during Soviet times, leaders set borders not according to Huntington's theories but based

on political considerations without regard for local traditions, languages, religions or mentality.

If Soviet leaders wanted to attach to Ukraine what are now its southern and eastern regions — and what were previously part of Russia — they did so. If former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev wanted to "give" Russia's Crimea to Ukraine, it required only the stroke of a pen.

As for western Ukraine, the outcome of World War II added to Soviet territory what is now Ukraine's westernmost part. The area has been traditionally oriented toward the West. This is how the patchwork quilt of civilizations that is today's Ukraine was formed. It is a country with two poles: Donetsk in the east and Lviv in the west.

These historical factors help explain the reason for the current bitter conflict in Ukraine. The Kiev authorities' slogan of "the unity of Ukraine" and President Petro Poroshenko's recent announcement that the only official language in the country is Ukrainian reflect only the short-term interests of Kiev and the West, but in no way reflect that country's historical and civilizational boundaries.

The formerly Russian peninsula of Crimea has already "set sail" for Russia. And no matter what critics might claim, it is moving happily and harmoniously along its chosen course — for the sole reason that it is returning to its civilizational roots.

On the other hand, Ukraine's southern and eastern regions have been part of Ukraine much longer than Crimea and are not as homogenous because they have at least partly assimilated Ukrainian culture. That is what makes the situation there so complex and painful.

It is almost impossible in the midst of a war to determine exactly which course the majority of the local population would prefer, but this much is obvious: Some want to join Russia, some want to form the independent state of Novorossia, and some want the region to remain part of Ukraine.

Importantly, the first two groups equally reject the dictates of western Ukraine and Kiev, with their Western-backed agenda for the country.

After briefly toying with the idea of federalization, Kiev has now all but forgotten it. On one hand, war has a way of blinding the participants and casting everything in black and white. On the other hand, Kiev justifiably fears that implementing federalization would make it extremely difficult to control the country's southern and eastern regions.

There are three possible outcomes of this situation. In the first, the West helps Kiev crush all dissent and forces the eastern and southern regions to live in a "united" — albeit alien for them — Ukraine. History indicates that this solution might work for the short or medium term, but has no long-term prospects.

Recall the unsuccessful attempts by autocratic Orthodox Russia to digest the piece of Catholic Poland that it received when Poland was partitioned during the reign of Catherine the Great. There was also the equally unsuccessful attempt by the Soviet Union to Sovietize and Russify the Baltics. In both cases, the alien culture never gained a serious foothold.

In the second scenario, Kiev and the West will leave eastern and southern Ukraine alone,

either because they come to their senses or because they are unable to quell the resistance there.

That would give rise, for an indefinite period, to yet one more of the many areas on the world map with disputed borders and an unrecognized government. And yet it would more accurately reflect that region's civilizational reality.

The third option is for all parties, tired of war and the loss of life and property, to sit down at the negotiating table and somehow determine their future on the basis of mutual compromise. Of course, this is only a palliative measure, but it would stop the current bloodshed.

Huntington's ideas have not found favor with Western politicians or President Vladimir Putin. Contemporary international law has yet to decide which takes precedence: the principle of "territorial integrity" or "the right of peoples to self-determination."

With a double standard prevailing in modern political life, even the UN Charter continues to enshrine both of these principles. But that is only today's outlook: Huntington analyzed centuries, if not millennia for his book.

The United States under President Barack Obama, Russia under Putin, Germany under Chancellor Angela Merkel and the decrepit United Nations will eventually become just so many pages in the history books, but civilizational conflicts will endure.

A hundred or 200 years from now, few will even remember the current crisis in Ukraine, and schoolchildren might even confuse it on their exams with other "ancient" conflicts such as the Punic Wars and the Boer War.

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