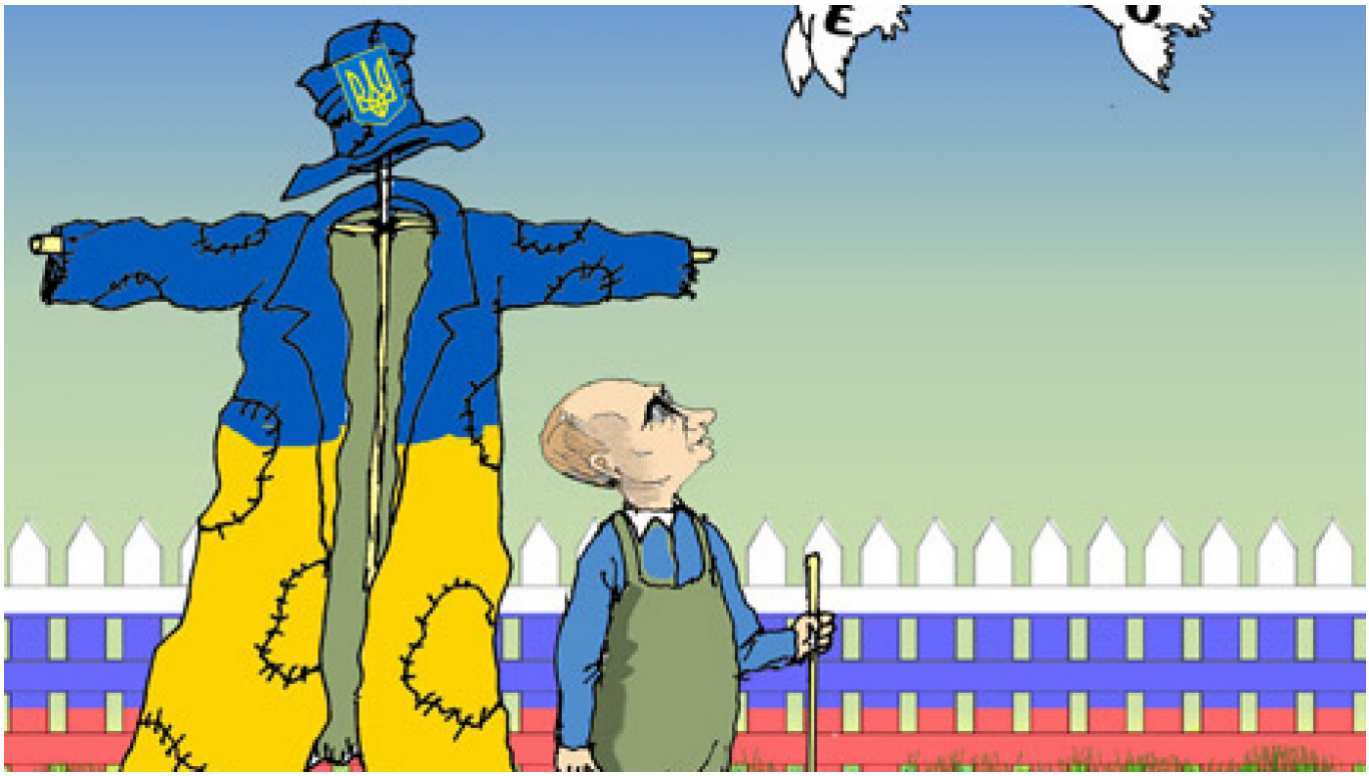
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Ukraine's Crisis Is Not the West's Fault

By Maria Snegovaya

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Russia and Ukraine are on the verge of war. According to NATO, more than 1,000 armed Russian soldiers are currently within Ukraine's territory. And as the stakes of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict keep increasing, so does the intensity of debate on the topic.

Is Russia solely responsible for the conflict in Ukraine? Or should Western leaders be held accountable as well? A recent article in Foreign Policy by the father of realist international thought, professor John J. Mearsheimer, pointed the finger at NATO.

The Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine is an attempt to stop the spread of Kiev's revolutionary ideology, not defend against NATO, writes Maria Snegovaya.

According to Mearsheimer, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO threatened Russia's strategic security by expanding too far into Eastern Europe. Despite Russia's constant complaints on this issue, the Clinton administration heavily backed this expansionist program.

As a result, in 1999 the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO; in 2004 another seven Eastern European countries followed. However, at that time Russia was still too weak to respond to what it viewed as NATO-imposed threats to Russia's strategic interests. The situation changed dramatically in 2008.

In April 2008 NATO held a summit in Bucharest where the issue of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO was raised. While speaking during a closed meeting Putin threatened that if Georgia joined NATO, Russia would be forced to create a buffer zone in between them, while Ukraine would simply "cease to exist."

Although at the 2008 summit NATO refused to admit Georgia and Ukraine, then-U.S. President George W. Bush's administration introduced a guarantee that both countries would one day become NATO members.

According to Mearsheimer, Putin was utterly enraged by this guarantee, resulting in his August 2008 aggression against Georgia. But apparently the Georgian war did not teach Western leaders the necessary lesson, and they kept on promoting Western values in Ukraine.

Ultimately this led to the February 2014 Euromaidan revolution that toppled pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych. In Mearsheimer's view, Putin "rightly" interpreted this as a Washington-backed coup, and counteracted it by annexing Crimea and destabilizing Ukraine's southeast.

But while Mearsheimer's theory might sound coherent, it makes multiple major leaps.

First, the timing of Russia's aggression against Ukraine remains completely unexplained by his hypothesis. Despite facing a serious threat to its strategic national interests — under Mearsheimer's definition — since at least 2004, Russia didn't seem to care much until 2008.

In fact, Russia was so blind to immediate security threats that it developed an active partnership with NATO, participating in joint military exercises in Afghanistan and peacekeeping operations throughout this time. In 2007 the Russian government even ratified an agreement that allowed NATO troops and arms to pass through Russia's territory in case of a military necessity.

Moreover, rumors about Russia's potential NATO accession spread actively until at least 2009. Earlier this August, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the head of Russia's nationalist LDPR party, announced that the decision to start World War III had "already been made" in the Kremlin.

But in 2008 to 2009, the moment was quite different. At that time, Alexei Mitrofanov, chairman of the Duma Committee on Information Policy, insisted that Russia would join NATO within the next 15 years, given the extensive cooperation of the time.

Second, even back in 2008 Putin reacted much more anxiously to Ukraine's prospects of NATO accession, as opposed to Georgia's, indicating that NATO was not the heart of the issue.

As reported by Kommersant, when talking of Georgia [during the 2008 NATO alliance meeting] the Russian president spoke quietly. But when the discussion switched to Ukraine he exploded. Referring to Bush he said: "You do understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a country!"

Finally, based on Mearsheimer's argument, it is also unclear why the threat of Ukraine's NATO accession became greater after Yanukovych's ouster. Prior to the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine's provisional post-revolutionary government did not take active steps to enhance NATO integration, nor did it make any bold statements on the topic.

Instead, it seems that what provoked Putin early in November 2013 and later in February 2014 was not Ukraine-NATO integration, but rather EU accession. If anything, serious discussions of Ukraine's NATO membership in 2014 began after (not prior to) Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Historically, wars often occur in the wake of ideological polarization. As Stephen Walt shows in "Revolution and War," the temporary weakness of a revolutionary state encourages its rivals to attack. Moreover, the leaders of old regimes typically fear the spread of revolutionary ideas, especially if the revolutionary state has a threatening ideology.

In his research, Akos Lada has shown that such a conflict is particularly likely if two countries share a common cultural — ethnicity, language, religion — identity. If two countries are culturally alike but differ in their political institutions, the more repressive regime will see its neighbor's more liberal ideology as transferable and therefore threatening

The example of the two Koreas illustrates such a point. Frightened that North Koreans would observe South Korea's success and push for democratic changes in their own country, North Korean dictators cut off their citizens from information about the south. Lada's 20th century dataset includes about 20 cases of conflicts between culturally similar countries which were preceded by a pro-democracy revolution in one of them.

Ukraine's crisis fits this model perfectly. Russians and Ukrainians are ethnically, religiously and linguistically close, enabling tight family and friendship linkages to exist between Russia and Ukraine. Democratic change in brotherly Ukraine could therefore spread to Russia, a development the Kremlin is now doing its best to prevent.

But it is the EU, not NATO, which is no doubt viewed as the real threat. Prior to the EU accession agreement, the Kremlin could count on its wealth and influence to keep Kiev from ever becoming too democratic.

But the EU accession agreement, the spark that started Ukraine's revolution, is particularly threatening in that it would lay the groundwork for further integration with Europe. This would eventually deprive Putin of the leverage he has over Kiev and expose Russia to Ukraine's more democratic sentiments.

In its invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin is working to ensure its citizens' unquestioning allegiance, not Russia's territorial integrity.

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