

Russia and Ukraine: A Destructive Codependency

The Russia-Ukraine relationship has moved from cozy mutual exploitation to lethal hostility.

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Inna Varenytsia / AP / TASS

Five years after the Ukraine crisis began, and as the presidential campaign gets under way in that country, it is conventional to see Russia's intervention there and Ukraine's response as a modern example of interstate power politics. Yet those who try to analyze the Russia-Ukraine conflict through the prism of the national interests of the two countries or merely as a symptom of Russian imperial inclinations are doomed to failure.

The truth is more complicated. Since independence, Russia and Ukraine have been intertwined in what we might call a geopathological embrace. They have become strategic satellites of one another. I regard them not as sovereign entities but as an involuntary dyad in

which each side sees the other both as a model and as an adversary. Moreover, this state of affairs is not a deviation from the global norm but a constituent part of the new globalized world.

The Belavezha Accords of December 1991, signed by the leaders of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, dissolved the USSR but left behind a vacuum of ideals. The post-Communist countries of central and eastern Europe found a new model in the West and began what Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes have called the “age of imitation,” which began in 1989. This imitation created a consensus of norms that masked a gap between the imitators and those they are imitating.

In the 1990s, Russia and Ukraine went down a different route, one of codependence, focused less on the West than on each other. The Russian side could not articulate properly its desire to swallow up Ukraine, as it could not fully explain that desire to itself. Ukraine enjoyed what looked like a safe game in which it could count on gas contracts worth billions with Russia.

At the turn of the millennium, the relationship took a dangerous turn. Enraptured by the example of the new leader of Russia, Vladimir Putin, both president Leonid Kuchma and the Ukrainian opposition aspired to anoint their own Putin-like figures to be the country’s next leader. The trouble was that the succeeding two presidents, Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych, were the worst leaders independent Ukraine has had.

In Moscow, there was an obsession with controlling Ukraine, which only grew stronger as the Russian elite had no idea what to do with their own country. Even the reformers of the Yeltsin era, who were still powerful in the early 2000s, began to see Ukraine as a counter-project where they could build what they had failed to inside Russia.

Just over five years ago, in 2014, the Maidan protests began, caused by the greed and hesitations of the former Ukrainian president, Yanukovych. The urban revolution that followed, like all classic revolutions, could not be controlled. The old state lost its ability to manage the nation, while the revolutionary forces failed to acquire that right. A hiatus, a crack in the system, appeared and the Kremlin rushed in and captured Crimea.

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Then, in the spring of 2015, a grotesque imitation of the Kiev revolution appeared in Donbas, a cosmopolitan Vendée, that was neither Russian nor Ukrainian or even national, but a third entity in the bipolar system. Life in the two incomplete republics of DNR and LNR continues after a fashion, there is no proper front and people on both sides live with two or three passports. The scarecrow of a “hybrid war” is very useful when a presidential campaign is kicking off in Ukraine. And what else is there to talk about on Russian television except Ukraine?

Both countries have suffered. The patriotic mobilization in Ukraine bled the “Revolution of Dignity” dry and triggered the years of reaction of 2014–2017 in Russia. The Russian television public has been punished by five years of relentless coverage of life in another country.

Yet all the while, Russia and Ukraine, though fighting one another with implacable hostility, are also trading and collaborating as well. Someone dies fighting in Donbas, or gets blown up in a lift, but the survivors, sitting in a café in Luhansk, inform their relatives on the Russian mobile service Beeline, using the Ukrainian discounting option “Moya Ukraina.”

Have the two countries formed two separate Russian and Ukrainian national identities? Yes, if we are talking about two separate personalities. No, if we are talking about two kinds of statehood. They are not so much two national types as actors’ masks. It is no accident that the current favorite in the Ukrainian presidential race is a Russian-Ukrainian comic actor who used to provide content for Moscow television, Volodymyr (Vladimir) Zelenskiy.

The relationship has become so pathological that each side sees the future through the other, desiring it or wishing it harm. Trying to look deep inside itself, each finds there only a stinging impression of the hated other.

For the foreseeable future, any topic that is cloaked in the Ukrainian context has become unresolvable. The expansion of NATO, EU enlargement, the U.S. missile defense, the base of the Black Sea fleet, the difficult destiny of the Eurasian Union—all these are now reasons why Russia feels insulted and forgets to form a strategy. And, in truth, what could Russia actually do with Ukraine—try to keep it? The only desire it has is a toxic one, to break the will of the other side.

In this duel, one side—the Russian side—is richer and more powerful, but it’s less clear if it is the one that is leading events. Why should Moscow initiate a meaningless conflict in the Kerch Strait on the eve of a summit with the U.S. president, which both sides were eagerly anticipating? And then continue the escalation by seizing a group of Ukrainian sailors it does not know what to do with?

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In the past, the kind of clash that occurred in the Kerch Strait was the siren call for a slide toward full-scale war. But no one is shuddering this time. Even as the maritime battle was at its peak, it was still possible to buy President Petro Poroshenko’s Roshen chocolates from a kiosk in central Moscow right opposite the Ministry of Defense.

Kiev and Moscow are not fighting a full-scale war, but both political establishments use alleged “victories” to get stronger and richer. Ukraine doesn’t want a victory over Russia—on the contrary. The Russian intervention is a gift that Kiev has long desired, a window to Europe cut by Putin himself. Kiev can count on Western support so long as it “contains Russia,” and as long as the territory of the Russian Federation is a base of support for the separatist regions of Donbas, Ukraine can call itself the symbolic frontier of the West. The price it pays is the loss of territory and the white-hot hatred between Kiev and Donetsk.

Is there a way out of this strategic cul-de-sac? Only if these twin mutually dependent satellites acknowledge the deep and destructive connection between them. Russia would consider ceasing fighting its war on the Ukrainian flank—but only if it drew Kiev closer. Ukraine dreams of liberating itself from Russia, but wants to score a symbolic victory at the same time. What we can be certain of is that neither of the two European nation-states that

were dreamed of in 1991 has yet established itself in the world.

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