The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Authors Oxana Shevel and Maria Popova Write the History of Ukraine-Russia Relations

"Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States"

By Emily Couch

December 10, 2023



Oxana Shevel (L) and Maria Popova (R) **Courtesy of the authors**

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine almost two years ago, scholars and journalists have rushed to make their contribution to the growing number of titles seeking to shed light on this devastating conflict.

"Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States" by Maria Popova, Associate Professor of Political Science at McGill University, and Oxana Shevel, Associate Professor of Political Science at Tufts University, is the first study to attempt an analysis of both sides of the conflict in one volume. In six chapters and just under 300 pages, Popova and Shevel argue that the full-scale war is the result of "an escalatory cycle between Russian imperialism and

Ukraine's commitment to its independent statehood that started in the wake of the USSR's dissolution in December 1991."

Chapters One, Two, and Three summarize almost a millennia of Russian and Ukrainian history, demonstrating how differing interpretations of these histories has contributed to the escalatory cycle. Chapters Three, Four, and Five analyze the geopolitical interaction between Russia, Ukraine, and the West pre-2014, while Chapters Five and Six narrate the Euromaidan revolution, the subsequent annexation of Crimea, and the emergence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Popova and Shevel conclude by claiming that the full-scale invasion is "another step in the escalatory cycle, one which has turbo-charged the divergence between Ukraine and Russia."

Popova and Shevel offer a powerful riposte to the notion, popular among international relations "realists," that the West provoked the full-scale invasion by encroaching too aggressively on Russia's "near abroad." To make this argument, they write, "implies Russia's democratization and foreign policy did not depend on its own agency." In fact, they note that amid the separatist insurgencies in Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan/Armenia, and Tajikistan in the 1990s and early 2000s, "the West largely deferred to Russia's handling of these conflicts, perceiving them as falling within its sphere of influence." Focusing primarily on developments within Ukraine and Russia, the authors demonstrate that the Russo-Ukrainian war cannot be understood without understanding the societies engaged in it.

While counterfactuals can be controversial in historical analyses, here the authors employ them to great effect. Among them is the speculation as to what might have happened if Russia had pursued "civic nation-building" rather than "imperialization" — one of many moments when both countries could have taken different paths. What if the political center of Ukraine in the 1990s and early 2000s had not thrown its weight behind the right (the political force that advocated this version of Ukrainian-ness) due to its own economic interests in separating from Moscow? Would a Ukrainian identity, unique and distinct from Russia's, have emerged? What if democratic competition had survived in Russia and the "ethno-civilizational vision" of Russian identity that set it on a collision path with Ukraine did not dominate? Popova and Shevel's willingness to consider alternative outcomes illustrates that the full-scale war was not preordained. This undermines the increasingly popular notion that the two countries have always been destined for conflict due to the supposedly intrinsic disposition of the former to authoritarianism and servitude, and the latter to democracy and freedom.

The authors deserve particular commendation for their clear-eyed assessment of Ukraine's internal challenges. "Ukrainian democracy is, of course, under strain from the full-scale war," they write, noting that the government has made "some questionable calls" on maintaining unity, fighting disinformation, and identifying alleged collaborators. And Popova and Shevel's clarity regarding the need for the authorities to "engage with the advice of human rights groups monitoring minority rights" and to ensure that measures countering Russian influence "do not violate democratic rights such as freedom of religion" is a refreshing intervention.

In a book that covers so much ground, it is not surprising to encounter some lacunas. In their analysis of Ukraine, they give great consideration to the many opinion polls on the attitudes

of ordinary Ukrainian citizens towards issues such as EU integration and how controversial historical actors like the OUN and UPA should be remembered. By contrast, their analysis of Russia provides comparatively little insight into, and few statistics on, how ordinary Russians responded to the national identity projects of the elite. While accurate opinion polls are, of course, harder to find in authoritarian contexts, greater attention to the interaction between elite identity conceptions and those of ordinary Russians would have enhanced the vivid picture that the authors paint of state and societal divergence.

A significant thread left hanging is the claim that the escalatory cycle between Russia and Ukraine is a "generalizable pattern that can be analyzed across the post-Soviet region." The idea is intriguing and likely to whet the appetites of international relations scholars in search of models with general applicability. It is also a draw for regional specialists interested in how this pattern does or does not map onto relations between Russia and other 'post-Soviet' countries, such as Georgia. But as the authors point out in Chapter One, Ukraine's "belonging in the 'true' Russian national imaginary" is a special case shared only with Belarus, where Lukashenka is not about to hand over his power to his neighbor. And so this escalatory cycle seems not useful for explaining or predicting the development of relations between Russia and, for example, Central Asian nations. It is unfortunate that the authors do not return to this key claim, although it does leave offer specialists in these other countries fertile ground for future study.

"Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States" is the latest, but certainly not the last, book seeking to make sense of a senseless war. The text, however dense in some sections, an essential read for anyone researching or working on the region.

Chapter Two: Regime divergence

The dissolution of the USSR produced Russia and Ukraine as independent states under international law. While both embarked on a path toward democratization, early similarities soon gave way to divergence in their political development. Ukraine's democratization unfolded slowly, in fits and starts, while Russia's attempt to build a democracy stumbled early in the 1990s, ushering in a long period of creeping autocratization, which eventually produced Putin's post-2012 personalist dictatorship. In this chapter, we discuss key turning points that led to Ukraine and Russia's divergent political trajectories, such as the 1993 confrontation between Yeltsin and the Russian parliament, the transition from Yeltsin to Putin and the quick marginalization of the Yeltsin-era oligarchs, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine against manipulated elections, Yanukovych's attempt to reverse democratic gains in 2010–2014, and Putin's protest crackdown after the 2011–2012 manipulated electoral cycle. The most consequential event was Ukraine's Orange Revolution. It put Ukraine on a democratic and pro-European path and triggered fears in Putin's Russia, which accelerated the descent into authoritarianism and the consolidation of Russia's imperial vision. The significant regime divergence between Ukraine and Russia went hand-in-hand with an escalation of Russia's coercion against Ukraine and set the stage for the 2014 start of Russia's military aggression. We also consider some counterfactuals. What if Ukraine's democratic trajectory had ended in the failure of the 2004 Orange Revolution? Could regime similarity between Ukraine and Russia have reduced the likelihood of war?

Presidents vs. parliaments amid economic crisis

Russia and Ukraine started their journeys as independent states with nearly identical state institutions and incumbent leadership. In addition to the nation-building imperative discussed in Chapter 1, the new states faced two other monumental tasks – to transition from the collapsing command economy to the market and to build the institutions of an independent and democratic state. Both tasks turned out to be tall orders, both states hit similar obstacles, and elites committed similar mistakes. For much of the 1990s, the political and economic trajectories of Ukraine and Russia unfolded somewhat in parallel.

In both cases, the first elected president was a popular, Soviet-era republican leader – Yeltsin in Russia, Kravchuk in Ukraine. Each president also inherited a boisterous parliament with similar parties and factions: an unreformed and retrograde Communist Party, a market reformers' faction, a nationalist faction, which was aligned with the reformist camp in Ukraine, but in Russia formed a red-brown coalition with the Communists, and a centrist "swamp" of ideologically muddled independents. The fragmented parliaments did not represent institutionalized party systems, but the zeitgeist of political competition they had carried over from the perestroika period. The same applied to debates in the media – there were a variety of viewpoints represented and intense discussion. Media pluralism and freedom were not institutionalized and guaranteed but existed de facto and ad hoc.Both states needed to adopt a new Constitution to replace the 1978 Soviet Constitution, but intra-elite competition complicated the process. Instead, the legislatures adopted and then overrode dozens of constitutional amendments to the existing Constitution and the presidents often governed through decree powers. As in the waning years of the USSR, political elites constantly rearranged the institutional landscape, forming and disbanding councils, ministries, and agencies and moving prerogatives among them to try to get the upper hand over political rivals. The air of ungovernability was strong and it negatively affected the other existential task – the economic transformation.

Economic reform in both countries followed a similar blueprint: price liberalization, macroeconomic stabilization, privatization, and the creation of market regulating institutions, although Russia proceeded through the stages more quickly than Ukraine. Yeltsin zeroed in on the economic reforms that his arch-rival Gorbachev had vacillated on and he aimed to "leap into post-Communism" as quickly and as irreversibly as possible. Kravchuk, on the other hand, prioritized nation- and state-building, while his economic reform strategy was cautious and reactive. For the first year of independence, Russia proceeded with bold reforms under prime minister Yegor Gaidar's team, while Ukraine's Vitold Fokin cabinet dragged its feet. Both economies were inextricably linked through a common currency (the ruble), issued by Russia's Central Bank, which led to tensions between the two countries, as Ukraine's policy of subsidizing losing state-owned enterprises to keep them afloat fuelled inflation in Russia as well. Price liberalization increased inflation even more, eventually to over 2,500% per year in both countries.

Efforts at macroeconomic stabilization eventually produced results – Russia had inflation under control by 1995, Ukraine by 1996 – but in the meantime multifaceted economic hardship hit both mass publics hard. Between 1990 and 1996 both economies were contracting by double digits every year. Industrial production plummeted. New businesses were slow to appear due to slow legislative reforms and regulatory changes. Unemployment increased as many state-owned enterprises went through painful restructuring or closed. Other sectors were plagued by "wage arrears," i.e. employees went to work but received no

wages for months, sometimes years. The deep depression precipitated a collapse of living standards. Comparative data show that both countries experienced steep negative changes in nearly all indicators of human development – the poverty rate increased dramatically, the death rate increased, life expectancy plummeted by 3–4 years, the fertility rate nearly halved, and crime rates soared.

At the same time, the distortions of the economic transition and the uneven pace of reforms opened multiple loopholes for people with political connections, shadowy start-up capital, or both, to make enormous windfall profits. The privatization process was non-transparent and often resulted in handing over major state enter- prises to private owners. The winners then either stripped the assets and destroyed the enterprises or made fortunes without much risk or investment. Through this process, both countries saw the emergence of a group that came to be called the oligarchs who used their political connections to create financial-industrial groups, which also often included media holdings that served their political interests. Meanwhile, trade unions and civil society were feeble and marginalized from the political process that produced economic policies. In Russia, oligarchic networks took over the natural resources industry. In Ukraine, the big prize was the industrial base in the east and the energy transport network. The absence of an appropriate legal framework or an independent and powerful judiciary to enforce what laws did exist on the books meant that the creation of the oligarchic class was accompanied by gang-style wars as different groups competed for turf and lucrative deals. In both countries, by the mid-1990s, nearly half of economic activity took place in the shadow economy.

Russia's and Ukraine's rough road toward marketization had less to do with the choice of reforms, their sequence, or their pace and everything to do with the weak post-Soviet state. The state lacked institutional control over its money supply. It could not administer its regional and local bureaucracies non-arbitrarily. And, most of all, it could not constrain rent-seeking because it did not have the proper self-regulation mechanisms and institutions.

Predictably, the economic freefall, societal malaise, lawlessness, and ungovernability resulted in political crisis. In both countries, resurgent Communist parties used the economic crisis to decry not just the market transition, but also the Soviet Union's collapse. In Russia, not only the communists, but a variety of nationalist forces preferred re-imperialization over building a state within Russia's borders and reforming the economy. In Ukraine, the grand bargain between the national-democratic and centrist elites produced an autarchic economic policy, aimed, in part, at resisting Russia's re-imperialization efforts, but also deepened the economic crisis. Both countries saw a rise in tensions in disaffected regions. In Russia, sovereignty movements emerged not only in ethnic minority regions (Chechnya, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and others), but in ethnically Russian regions as well that constructed economic grievances against the center. In Ukraine, the industrial region of Donbas was the locus of economic discontent. Yeltsin and Kravchuk attempted to push through new constitutions, which aimed to establish a strong presidency and increase governability. Both leaders hit a snag due to intensifying intra-elite competition and an increasingly hostile legislature. Kravchuk's main political rivals were his prime minister, Leonid Kuchma, and the chairman of parliament, Leonid Pliushch, while Yeltsin's challengers were the chairman of parliament, Ruslan Khasbulatov and the vice-president, Aleksandr Rutskoi.

The crises of governability during the economies' nadir in 1993–1994 offer the first sign of divergence between the two independent states and foreshadow that Ukraine would maintain and entrench political competition, whereas Russia would see its gradual stifling. In both countries, 1993 was marked by parliaments trying to adopt institutional and constitutional reforms aimed at constraining the president's decree powers and enshrining a more limited role for the chief executive. Expectedly, the incumbents wanted to prevent the hollowing out of their offices. The maneuvering through the spring and summer of 1993 in both countries included wrangling over early elections for both branches, impeachment and referendum votes and threats, as well as constant tension between the president and parliament over who would be prime minister and whether the president would be able to appoint his own regional representatives.

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