

The Ukrainian Perspective

Last week, *Plain News* published an article titled “Why Is Russia Invading Ukraine?” This article included the reasons Russian President Putin and his military leaders have given for invading Ukraine as well as a perspective on how military alliances among world powers can result in conflict and war. The article noted that Russia’s economic interests and security are likely at least part of the reason the Russian government launched an invasion of Ukraine.

This article will attempt to give the Ukrainian perspective. First, it will describe the recent history of Ukraine, including the political turmoil and ethnic divisions that have caused much internal conflict. Second, it will present Ukraine’s choice between allying with NATO or with Russia. Lastly, it will speculate about the hard choices the country faces in the midst of the invasion and what might be the outcome of each choice.

A Nation Divided

On August 24, 1991, the Ukrainian Parliament declared full independence from the Soviet Union. A popular referendum was held three months later to determine the voice of the people in regards to independence. The answer was a resounding yes. About 84% of the eligible voting populace turned out for the referendum and around 90% cast their vote in favor of independence. The Ukrainian people made it very clear that they preferred to govern themselves rather than be under the authority of the Russian government in Moscow. The near-unanimity of the vote is a bit surprising considering that about 22% of the Ukrainian population at the time were ethnic Russians. Nevertheless, the vote was for independence, and the sovereign state of Ukraine joined the world.

While the country as a whole voted for independence, there were certain areas where pro-Russian sentiment stayed strong. At the time of independence, the population of the Crimean Peninsula was 66% ethnic Russian and only 27% ethnic Ukrainian. In the 1991 referendum, voter turnout in Crimea was lower than in the rest of Ukraine (67%), and only 54% of those who voted supported independence. Six months later, the Crimean Parliament voted for independence from Ukraine, but a popular referendum on the issue was never held due to strong opposition from the Ukrainian government in Kyiv. Instead, Kyiv said Crimea could be a self-governing state while still remaining under the sovereignty of Ukraine.

A second region where support for Russia remained strong was in the eastern Ukraine oblasts (administrative areas) of Donetsk and Luhansk. At the time of independence, the ethnic Russian portion of the population was 44% in Donetsk and 45% in Luhansk. While I could find no data giving the results of the 1991 independence referendum in these regions, it seems likely that the areas with a higher proportion of ethnic Russians were less supportive of an independent Ukraine.

While Ukraine was under the control of the Soviet Union, the Russians in Ukraine enjoyed a privileged majority status. Yes, they were a minority in Ukraine itself, but they were part of the majority ethnic group of the Soviet Union, and the Russian language was the language of wider communication for the whole Union. Some of these Russians had lived in Ukraine for centuries while others were recent immigrants, having been moved to Ukraine at the will of the Soviet Union leadership while Ukrainians were transported from their homeland to other portions of the Soviet Union. This all changed upon Ukrainian independence. Now, the Russians in Ukraine were the minority group, and Ukrainian was the only official language of the new country. Many of the Ukrainian Russians were frustrated that Russian was not recognized as a second official language in Ukraine. Full Ukrainian citizenship was granted to all Russians that wanted to remain living in Ukraine, but many chose to leave nonetheless. This resulted in the Russian percentage of the population dropping from 22% at the time of independence to 17% in 2001 (when Ukraine conducted its first and only thorough census).

From the outset, Ukrainian elections revealed a political polarization in the country, with the eastern and western regions frequently supporting opposing candidates. Ukraine’s first president, Leonid Kravchuk, was elected the same day as the independence referendum and quickly went about establishing and strengthening Ukraine’s sovereignty. Kravchuk opposed sharing currency and armed forces with Russia, leading to Ukraine’s rejection of membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Under his leadership, the country pursued a pro-Western foreign policy. When Kravchuk campaigned for re-election in 1994, he received strong support from western Ukraine. He was opposed by former prime minister Leonid Kuchma who promised better relations with Russia and was supported more strongly in eastern Ukraine. Kuchma narrowly won the election, and the transfer of

power took place peacefully. While Kuchma did pursue more friendly relations with Russia as promised, he also maintained the previous administration's pro-Western policies. When Kuchma successfully campaigned for re-election in 1999, the vote did not split along geographic lines as it had in 1994, suggesting that the east-west divide was not as significant as previously thought. Unfortunately, this trend toward unity did not last.

The election of 2004 brought Ukraine to the brink of civil war. Rather than run for a third term, President Kuchma endorsed Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich as the next president, with Yanukovich also receiving the support of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The leading opposition candidate was former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko, running on an anti-corruption platform. Problems arose during the campaign when Yushchenko and his campaign staff were prevented from visiting Donetsk and other eastern regions of Ukraine; places where Yanukovich enjoyed strong support. Then, just weeks before the election, Yushchenko began experiencing serious health problems which were later linked to dioxin poisoning. While no firm conclusions were reached, it appeared that Yushchenko was poisoned by intentionally-contaminated food or drink at a dinner with a group of senior Ukrainian officials. The elections were held as planned and Yanukovich was declared the winner in the runoffs. However, Yushchenko's supporters immediately staged protests, declaring the results to be fraudulent. A month later, the Supreme Court invalidated the election results and ordered a new runoff election, in spite of Yanukovich's supporters in the east threatening to secede from Ukraine if the election results were annulled. Yushchenko won the re-scheduled elections with 52% of the vote.

Yushchenko's presidency was a rocky one; his first cabinet and prime minister served only eight months before being dismissed. The next prime minister lasted only a few months as well. The 2006 parliamentary elections gave the opposition the advantage, and Yushchenko was forced to accept his former rival Yanukovich as his new prime minister. The ensuing power struggle led to another round of parliamentary elections (and another change in prime minister) in 2007. Continuing issues led Yushchenko to dissolve Parliament completely in 2008. Yushchenko supported Ukraine joining both NATO and the European Union, but little progress was made on these goals during his presidency.

The 2010 presidential election was a contest between Yuliya Tymoshenko and Viktor Yanukovich. While both had been prime ministers under President Yushchenko, Tymoshenko supported his pro-Western foreign policy

while Yanukovich promoted closer ties with Russia. Yanukovich won the contest with strong support in eastern Ukraine, while Tymoshenko was favored in western Ukraine. In 2011, Tymoshenko was convicted of abuse of power in connection with a natural gas deal with Russia two years earlier and given a seven-year prison sentence. Many observers felt that her trial and conviction were politically motivated. In November 2013, Ukraine was set to sign an association agreement with the European Union, which was to increase political and economic ties between the two parties. Just days before the planned signing, President Yanukovich scuttled the agreement under intense pressure from Moscow to do so. Protestors took to the streets in Kyiv, and police violently dispersed the crowds. Demonstrations continued, with the protestors now calling for the resignation of Yanukovich. By January 2014, the protests had turned to riots, and Yanukovich signed a series of laws restricting the right to protest, but this only increased the unrest. Hundreds of thousands swarmed the streets of Kyiv, occupying multiple government buildings. The protesting even spread to eastern Ukraine where Yanukovich had traditionally received strong support. As the violence escalated, the European Union began threatening sanctions on Ukraine unless the Yanukovich administration took steps to de-escalate the violence. In February 2014, an EU-brokered deal between the two sides called for early elections and the formation of an interim unity government. Yanukovich fled Kyiv ahead of an impeachment vote that stripped him of his presidential powers. A week later he appeared in Russia where he delivered a defiant speech insisting he was still the rightful president of Ukraine.

While the change in power was just what pro-Western protestors were calling for, other groups in Ukraine were not so pleased. Pro-Russian protestors in Crimea became more active, and armed men surrounded the airports of Sevastopol and Simferopol and occupied the Crimean Parliament building. Many of the armed men lacked identifying markings on their uniforms, but they used Russian military equipment, and Russia eventually admitted to moving troops into the region. On March 6, 2014, the Crimean Parliament voted to declare independence from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation. A public referendum ten days later showed 97% support for the decision, but observers questioned several aspects of the voting, including the presence of armed men at polling stations. Russia immediately supported Crimea's move to join the Federation, but the interim government in Kyiv rejected the results of the referendum, and the United States and EU imposed sanctions on numerous Russian and Crimean officials.

In April 2014, pro-Russian gunmen stormed and occupied government buildings in four different cities in Donetsk and Luhansk. As in Crimea, many of the armed men had unmarked uniforms but used Russian equipment and acted with military precision. The Ukrainian government threatened a military response if the gunmen did not leave the government buildings and called on the UN to dispatch peace-keeping forces in the area, but the pro-Russian militia only solidified their hold in the region. Russia denied direct involvement, but Russian troops carried out military drills just across the border from the rebel regions. An independence referendum held in separatist cities in May favored independence from Ukraine, but it was widely regarded as rigged. Masked gunmen directly supervised the polls, many participants cast multiple ballots, and Ukrainian police seized 100,000 pre-completed “yes” ballots.

The 2014 special presidential election was won by billionaire businessman Petro Poroshenko. Voter turnout was strong in most of the country, but voting was seriously disrupted in Donetsk and Luhansk where gunmen occupied polling stations and seized ballot boxes. Poroshenko immediately set about restoring peace in the east, which he attempted to do by using military force to put down the uprising. The Ukrainian army claimed significant amounts of territory from the separatists, but the rebels shot down a Ukrainian fighter jet and a troop transport plane, killing 49 people. Ukrainian officials blamed both attacks on the Russian military as the weapons used to take down the planes were more sophisticated than the rebel forces previously had access to. The conflict in eastern Ukraine came into the international spotlight on July 17, 2014, when a passenger jet was downed by a surface-to-air missile in Donetsk, killing 298 people. Both Ukrainian forces and separatist fighters denied responsibility for the attack. The conflict continued in spite of numerous talks between the Ukrainian government, the Russian government, and separatist fighters. President Poroshenko pursued a Europe-oriented foreign policy, signing the long-delayed association agreement with the European Union in June, 2014. Poroshenko then proposed a set of political and economic reforms aimed to prepare Ukraine for full EU membership in 2020. His government stated that pursuing NATO membership would be a priority as well.

The situation in eastern Ukraine did not improve. The Ukrainian army kept fighting the separatists forces, and casualties mounted. Russian-sourced military equipment kept showing up in rebel hands, but Russia kept denying direct involvement. When Russian paratroopers were captured in Ukraine, Moscow stated that they had crossed the border accidentally. In

November 2018, Russian navy ships in the Kerch Strait fired on three Ukrainian ships before seizing the ships and their crews. Poroshenko declared martial law in 10 regions in Ukraine and called on the United Nations to condemn Russia’s actions.

Poroshenko’s proposed reforms made little progress, and his approval ratings dropped into the single digits approaching the 2019 elections. In a run-off election, Poroshenko was crushingly defeated by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a former actor who ran on an anti-corruption platform. Zelenskyy’s first goal was to negotiate peace in the east, and he proposed an agreement in which both sides would withdraw from the fighting zone. His opponents said such an agreement would be capitulation with Russia, but the Ukrainian public was tired of war and supported Zelenskyy’s agenda. Little progress was made toward this goal, and Zelenskyy was soon distracted by a political scandal in the United States (President Trump attempted to push Zelenskyy to investigate the activities of the Biden family in Ukraine) and the COVID-19 pandemic. In late 2021, Russia began the armed forces buildup on the Ukrainian border that led the current ongoing invasion.

Pressed on Both Sides

As we have seen, there are differing opinions inside Ukraine as to what alliances the country should make. These differences are only compounded by the pressures the country has felt from outside its borders. Big neighbor Russia has certainly made its wishes known as to what direction Ukraine should take and has taken military action when the country has gone against those wishes. The pressure from the West might not be so overt, but Ukraine has felt it nonetheless. NATO’s expansion in eastern Europe has certainly not gone unnoticed in Ukraine. As the balance of power in its neighborhood has shifted toward the West, Ukraine has felt compelled to make a decision. Should it cast its lot with its neighbor and long-time ally Russia? Or should it embrace the democratic alliances in the West? Deciding either way would bring unwelcome consequences. Choosing Russia would mean forgoing economic prosperity, cause protests among the Ukrainians who preferred a NATO/ EU alliance, and bring condemnation from the world’s democracies for allying with an autocratic government. Choosing NATO and the EU would bring the wrath of Russia down on Ukraine and cause protests among the Ukrainians who preferred a Russian alliance. Because the Ukrainian population is divided, they have not consistently elected leaders that prefer western alliances nor leaders that prefer Russian alliances. Thus, Ukraine has see-sawed between the two options for decades.

The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the 2014 special election combined to polarize the country even further. For those that opposed Russia, the “theft” of Crimea and Russia’s support of the separatists in the east only proved that Russia should not be trusted. During the Soviet Union years, the central government in Moscow had frequently taken advantage of Ukraine, and millions of Ukrainians died as result. Now, here was confirmation that Russia’s selfish ways had not changed, and an alliance with Russia would only mean more trouble for Ukraine in the future.

For those who supported a Russian alliance, the special election was infuriating. A pro-Russian president was in office, and now he was being ousted before his term was up. The worst part of it was that the deal that led to the special election had been brokered by the European Union. Here was the West meddling in Ukraine’s affairs. Many pro-Russian Ukrainians came to see the 2014 change in power as a coup d’état sponsored by the West.

The areas where pro-Russian sentiment was the strongest either split off and joined Russia (like Crimea) or began fighting for independence from Ukraine (like Donetsk and Luhansk). This left the rest of Ukraine with a majority that preferred alliance with the West. Public opinion polls from 2002-2013 show that a strong majority of Ukrainians opposed the country joining NATO. This preference shifted suddenly in the first half of 2014. Since then a majority (which has become stronger the last few years) supports membership in NATO. This shift in sentiment is no doubt partly due to Russia’s aggressive actions in 2014 and the years since. Another factor, though, is the fact that since 2014 at least some of the opinion polls have not covered the Russia-leaning populations of Crimea, Donetsk, or Luhansk, meaning 8.5 million people that Ukraine claims as citizens are not being represented in the polls.

Ukraine’s Economy

When the Soviet Union broke apart, Ukraine was widely regarded as the former Soviet state most likely to prosper economically. Ukraine has rich farmland and is one of the world’s largest exporters of grain. Oil and gas deposits discovered in recent years promise rich income for the nation if they are tapped. In spite of the natural resources the country possesses, Ukraine has struggled economically. The political instability that has haunted the country since independence along with the fighting in recent years have kept foreign corporations from investing too heavily in Ukraine. The local economy has see-sawed with the sometimes-violent changes of leadership.

Knowing what Ukraine possesses in natural resources and the economic potential of those resources has without doubt influenced the foreign policy of at least some of Ukraine’s leaders. Ukraine’s natural resources (agricultural products, oil, and natural gas) closely match Russia’s main exports. There is no chance that Russia would be an importer of Ukrainian oil and natural gas, but the European Union would be happy for another gas exporter to enter the market and drive prices down through competition with Russia. If Ukraine must choose between good relations with Russia or the West (EU/USA), the economically smart choice is quite obviously the West.

Russia is certainly aware of the threat that Ukraine poses to its economy. If Ukraine were to join NATO and the European Union, western countries would no doubt give trading preferences to their new ally. Russia, which has kept distance between itself and the West, would see its exports fall dramatically, unless China or other countries more friendly to Russia could make up the difference. This threat to the Russian economy incentivizes Russia to actually keep the Ukrainian economy suppressed. Whether or not this has been a main goal of Russia’s involvement and recent aggression in Ukraine, it has certainly been one result of the conflict.

Ukraine’s Options

Ukraine has surprised the world by mounting an unexpectedly strong response to the Russian invasion. The Russian leadership thought (or at least implied they thought) that much of the Ukrainian populace was suppressed under a Western-controlled government and would welcome the Russian liberators and flock to their side. NATO observers believed that Russia’s military superiority would result in Ukrainian forces being defeated and overrun in short order. The reality is that the Ukrainian military and civilian populace have largely stood their ground, fighting for their right to a democratic government and alliances with whom they please. The loss of Crimea and the impending loss of Donetsk and Luhansk have already cost Ukraine economic potential and political prestige, and Ukrainians are not inclined to let the Russians have any more of Ukraine. Many ethnic Ukrainians were relieved, at the breakup of the Soviet Union, that Ukraine could finally be free to govern itself after being ruled by other empires for centuries. They see this long-awaited freedom as something worth fighting and dying for.

In spite of a stronger-than-expected resistance to the Russian invasion, Ukraine cannot expect to win a decisive victory over Russia. Ukraine’s leaders did not give in to Russia’s demands prior to the invasion

because they expected that Western nations would lend military support if an invasion did happen. Ukraine was quite disappointed when NATO refused to send troops or air forces to fight in Ukrainian territory. Lacking this external military support, Ukraine is left with three main options: fight to the death, surrender to Russian domination, or negotiate a long-term neutrality.

Many Ukrainians have expressed a will to give their lives for Ukrainian freedom, and indeed, many have done just that already. If the Ukrainian leadership decides the country will fight to the death, the war will continue until a large percentage of the Ukrainian population has been killed, until the country runs out of resources to keep fighting, or until so many of the country's leadership have been killed that there is no longer anyone in authority to organize a resistance.

The second option is to surrender to Russian domination. This option is perhaps the least likely, given the will of the Ukrainian people to fight and the Russian army's inability to win quick victories in Ukraine. If Russia were to dominate Ukraine, it would likely overhaul the Ukrainian government, setting up leaders who will cooperate with Russia and turning Ukraine into a puppet state of Moscow similar to what Poland and East Germany were in Soviet Union days. Alternatively, Russia might occupy Ukraine long-term or even annex all of Ukrainian territory into Russia.

The third possibility for Ukraine is to negotiate a long-term neutrality. This is essentially what Russia was demanding from Ukraine before the invasion. This would mean Ukraine giving up its ambitions for membership in NATO and the European Union and maintaining equal trade and diplomatic relations with Russia and the West. This would mean that Ukraine must give up some of its economic ambitions and maybe even relinquish all claims to Crimea and the separatist regions in the east.

Long-term neutrality may seem somewhat like defeat for Ukraine, as the country could not pursue certain foreign policies; that is, it wouldn't have the freedom to do whatever it wanted. However, neutrality may be the only way to bring peace to a country that has experienced more than its share or turmoil in the past century. Switzerland is famous for its refusal to enter into military alliances or get involved in military conflicts in any way. The Swiss have not entered into any foreign

conflict since the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815, and its tradition of neutrality goes back 500 years. Because it chose peace, the country was spared the devastation of World War I and World War II. Switzerland has been a respected and trusted arbitrator in settling numerous international conflicts, and the country is a center of world banking because it will not take sides even in financial issues. What if Ukraine would adopt Switzerland as a model of neutrality?

Conclusion

This article has been filled with discussion of alliances and loyalties, differing opinions and enmity. These are issues that accompany nationalism — supporting the interests of one country or people group over those of another. Preferring the interests of one's country over the rest of the world has been the source of most, if not all, of the conflicts in this world. As the Book of James says:

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (James 4:1-3 ESV).

Promoting the interests of one group of people at the disadvantage of others is something in which Christians must never get involved. People are created in the image of God and deserve our love and respect, no matter how they look or where they live or even what they have done. As an example, we have a God who “sends rain on the just and on the unjust” and who “is no respecter of persons.” A future article from Plain News will expand on the topic of nationalism; looking at the forms it can take and presenting a Christ-centered alternative.

While this article aimed to take a neutral position regarding Russian and Ukrainian political perspectives, we are not justifying the destruction of people, homes, and businesses, nor the trauma and long-term repercussions this awful war is bringing about. Evil is evil no matter where it is found.

~ Leonard Hege