Transformation of a Deformed State

In how far do external forces influence the nation-building process in Ukraine?

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1. Introduction

In November 2014, thousands of Ukrainian nationals flocked to the capital of Ukraine, defying the crispy cold and putting up their tents on the independence square in the heart of Kyiv. The Ukrainians, after decades of suffering first under the USSR and later under corrupt, self-interested leaders, have now started to reconstruct their national identity, which was polarized before, but not as much salient (Korostelina, 2013). The initial protests for a democratic, sovereign and anti-oligarchic Ukrainian state soon turned into two nationalist movements with opposed aims. On the one hand, the majority of the population demands a pro-Western foreign policy, a nationalist historical narrative and the legitimacy of both languages with the symbolic primacy of Ukrainian. On the other hand, a smaller group of Ukrainians, which is mainly living in the Donbas region, is striving for a different, Russian-friendly Ukraine (Kulyk, 2016, 2014). However, the protests were cracked down violently after a few days, and the country was thrust into a war-like state, and to this day, Ukraine is struggling for its own identity between Russia and the West.

Due to its sensitive geopolitical position right in between Russia and the EU, the Western and Eastern power blocks both have tried to assert influence on the situation (Horvath, 2015; Trenin, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2014). Following the realist paradigm of International Relations Theory, which in brief states that states act as purely self-interested international actors making use of any means to increase their power or ensure their survival (Walt, 1998; Mearsheimer, 2001), this paper hypothesizes that the extensive engagement of external powers with the conflict, ranging from military intervention to propaganda and funding, have interfered substantially with the identity formation of Ukrainians, who are struggling to find their place between East and West to this day. Thus, it is argued that the national identity of Ukraine has been heavily influenced and willingly polarized by both the EU, the US and Russia, without regards to the actual benefit for
the Ukrainian population or the will of the people increasing the chance of civil war (Mearsheimer, 2011).

We have picked the topic described above because, firstly, the Ukrainian conflict is still an up-to-date topic, and secondly, because we feel that the question of the importance of external influence on nation-building has not been discussed much in academic literature. Mostly, scholars concentrate on internal processes, but the case of Ukraine is particular in that there has been extensive heteronomous interference. The aim of the paper is trace the origins of Ukrainian nationalism, to identify the interests of the US, the EU and Russia in the conflict and to study in an explorative way in how far they influence Ukrainian identity formation, in the past as well as today.

2. Research question

In how far do external forces influence the nation-building process in Ukraine?

- What are the (historical) sources of nationalism in Ukraine?
- What are the interests in the conflict of the US, the EU and Russia respectively?
- How do the US, the EU and Russia take influence on Ukrainian nationalism from a realist perspective of International relations?

3. History

Telling the story of Ukraine comes with difficulties: the parties involved in the Ukrainian crisis have each created their own version of their past in order to use it for their respective purposes. The state has successively been dominated by external powers, for example Poland, Russia and the USSR, and only gained independence in 1990 (Kryzhanivsky et al 2017). The start of the current conflict announced itself already nine years later in 1999, when President Kuchma began a campaign against both the media and civil society freedom (Wilson 2006, p 21). Kuchma’s governance, stained by fraud and corruption, provoked more and more dissatisfaction among the population, and led up to the Orange Revolution in 2004, with mass protests for a liberal Western-oriented democracy in Ukraine (Kubicek 2009, p 323). The protests led to a more liberal president to be installed, however, the optimism of the Ukrainians faded quickly; the new government was dogged by corruption, the EU did not embrace Ukraine as a candidate country, and in 2006 the Orange coalition fell apart (ibid, p 324). Since Ukraine is located between Europe and Russia, the “West” and the “East” so to say, it constitutes an important buffer zone between those power blocks: Putin would like Ukraine to be loyal to Moscow, while the West supports a more democratic and liberal version of Ukraine. Thus, both sides have tried to assert influence on the situation, which has led to a variety of provocations, such as the NATO’s declaration that Ukraine will become a member (which is perceived as a threat by Putin) and Putin’s annexation of Crimea (which the West considered illegitimate) (Mearsheimer 2014, pp 77). In 2013, it again came to a wave of protest movements, known as the Euro-Maidan
demonstrations, which ended with the killing of a hundred protesters by special police and the collapse of the state apparatus (Stepanenko et al 2015, p 11).
The conflict is still ongoing. After the Crimea coup, which Putin claimed to have annexed to protect the rights of Russian citizens on the Peninsula, pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine declared independence from Ukraine (Sestanovich et al 2017). Violence between Russian-backed separatist forces and the Ukrainian military has by now killed over 9,500 and injured many more; and although Moscow denies its involvement, Ukraine and NATO have reported the buildup of Russian troops near the region (ibid).
In the Ukraine conflict, and in particular in the conflict about the areas around Luhansk and Donetsk (the Donbas area), both sides have attempted to use history to fit their arguments. We can see that historians from each side – the Ukrainian nationalists and the Russophile separatists – have made use of historical myth to justify their claim to the region (Wilson, 1995). Wilson, in an extensive analysis of the two historical narratives, has pointed out how the two sides have interpreted the past to their advantage. To summarise shortly, according to the Ukrainian narrative, “Kievan Rus” – a medieval principality which is located in what is today Ukraine – was the birthplace of the Ukrainian people. From the 16th century onwards, Ukraine was under Polish-Lithuanian rule, but the Cossacks increasingly asserted influence. Ukrainian nationalists claim that the Zaporizhzhian Cossacks – that is, the Ukrainian Cossacks – had particularly extensive control over the area which is now the Donbas. The Zaporizhzhians created their own culture, such as an architectural style (‘Ukrainian Baroque’), and used their own self-governing democratic system. They also spoke a distinct language, namely old Ukrainian. In the late 18th century, the Cossack state fell apart and the Zaporizhzhians dispersed. During the 19th century, with the industrialization and urbanization, the process of “Russification” started: Ukrainian historians claim that only from 1860 on, Ukraine started to take on a pronounced Russian character. According to these historians, Russification of Ukrainian ethnographic territory was achieved by, firstly, physical immigration of ethnic Russians, and secondly, by artificial suppression of the Ukrainian culture by, for example, limiting access to Ukrainian schools and mass media.
The Russian narrative of the history of Ukraine is, unsurprisingly, different in almost every aspect. According to the Russophile opinion, Kievian Rus was not more than a loose conglomerate of separate, ethnically diverse fiefdoms. It is accepted that the territory of today’s Ukraine has indeed been under Cossack rule, however, the importance of the Zaporizhzhians is downplayed, while the role of the Don Cossacks – the Russian ethnic Cossacks – is pronounced.
It is important to the Russophile argument that Russian immigration into Ukraine is not a recent phenomenon, but that Russian influence has been strong on Ukraine for many centuries, long before Ukraine formally became part of the Russian empire in the late eighteenth century. Pro-Russian historians also argue that culture and language in Ukraine has mainly been Russian before the Russian revolution in 1917. Due to nationalist aspirations, an artificial Ukrainian culture was promoted after that date, and the much criticized “Russification” after the Second World War was merely a return to the status quo. Furthermore, this perspective argued that the
mass immigration of Russians into Ukraine was a result of wartime depopulation and a natural consequence of reindustrialization and urbanization instead of a deliberate policy, as argued by Ukrainian nationalists (Wilson, 1995). Thus, we can see that, instead of one national history, there exist different narratives. The discrepancy between these ‘stories’ has led historians to argue that “Ukraine has had no history” (Von Hagen, 1995, p 659). We can or cannot agree to this, however, it shows that historical memory is something highly subjective, which can be altered in order to fit a specific purpose.

4. Theoretical framework

“You just don't in the twenty-first century behave in nineteenth-century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped-up pretext.”
(Secretary of State John Kerry’s response to the Crimea crisis as cited in Mearsheimer, 2014)

Relevance of Realist paradigm from International Relations Theories

The crisis in the Ukraine is seen as much more complex than merely a national conflict and some scholars even suggested it to be the starting point of another Cold War (Opoka, 2016). At the latest from the Russian annexation of the Crimea or the armed conflicts in the Donbas province, confrontation acquired international character at different levels: conflicts within the Ukraine, between Russia and the Ukraine, and between Russia and the West (ibid.). Therefore, it seems plausible and promising to use a framework from the academic field of International relations in this research, since it offers a more comprehensive understanding taking all relevant actors of the conflict into account. International Relations consists out of a diverse range of theoretical frameworks and assumptions to analyse cooperation and conflict in the world, which work as “lenses through which we can see (and make sense of) the world” (Jackson & Sorensen as cited in Opoka, 2016, p. 74). However, the debates on which framework might be most applicable to an event are infinite and disputed. Thus, depending on which theories and core assumptions are followed foreign policy, such as the one of Russia towards Ukraine, could be seen as either aggressive, irrational and unpredictable (Arias-King, De Arias & De La Canal, 2008) or as rational, adaptive and predictable (Mearsheimer, 2015; Kropatcheva, 2012).

Despite recognizing the relevance of the other main frameworks in international relations (IR) - those are liberalism and constructivism -, this paper adopts an (offensive) realist framework to understand and analyze the conflict in Ukraine due to two reasons. Firstly, realism has been the dominating theory of IR during the Cold war and has been regaining serious relevance for the last years (Walt, 1998; Kropatcheva, 2012). Secondly, the realist paradigm has already been convincingly applied various times on the case of Ukraine and is remaining popular in explaining the conflict. The popularity stems mainly from its pragmatism and its particular explanatory power for conflicts, which international organisations seem not capable to resolve, such as the one in Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014; D’Anieri, 2016; Kropatcheva, 2016, Opoka, 2016).
Nevertheless, the discussion part of this research will take insights of the other main theories into account, since “no single approach can capture all the complexity of contemporary world politics” as noted by Walt (1998, p.30). Thus, the remaining approaches might prove themselves as particularly relevant: especially if they can compensate the limitations of the chosen realist framework.

**Offensive realism**

There are several core assumptions of the realist paradigm, to which all of its streams more or less adhere and which in particular apply to offensive realism (Walt, 1998; Rose, 1998). In general, realism perceives IR as an (infinite) struggle of states and is not optimistic about the chances of ever disposing conflicts and war completely (Walt, 1998; Opoka, 2016; Mearsheimer, 2001). Offensive realists believe that the main actors in IR are states, which are thought of as rational, self-interested and unitary actors in their policies. In other words, states make the main decisions in world politics and always try to do so strategically by favoring their own best interest. Furthermore, offensive realists assume that the international structure is anarchic, which means that there is no arbitrary power, guaranteeing and maintaining order and security in the world. Therefore, states naturally have to struggle for their own security or survival to stay independent and conflicts are in the nature of IR (although that does not necessarily mean that they are unavoidable). As a result, states’ main aim is to preserve or increase their (relative) power to other states in order to be able to survive or maintain their own status. In contrast to liberalism or constructivism, the only way to boost a state’s security is to improve a state’s power, since realists expect that states can never be completely certain about other states’ plans or intentions. Power, which consequently is the main instrument of states to ensure their own security, initially has been defined merely as military power, but has been extended in the last decades to socio economic, such as wealth and population and other forms of potential power (ibid.). Consequently, the few ‘great’ powers have crucially more influence on world politics than middle or smaller powers. Offensive realists even doubt whether the latter might have any real self-determination, since they are highly dependent on the decisions of great powers, whether they like it or not. Deriving from those assumptions, the best a state could do would be to seek hegemony given the circumstances of constant struggle for survival in the world. Yet, since global hegemony seems currently unattainable due to the large bodies of water, which separate the continents, great powers try to achieve regional hegemony and avoid other states to do so in other regions (Mearsheimer, 2001). To sum up, in an anarchic international system, in which no state can completely know the intentions of another state, the best way to survive is to seek more power as a form of self-help, since this would be the only reliable form of protection (ibid.).

*Interests of actors involved in the Ukraine conflict from a realist perspective*

After a basic outline of offensive realism was given, an offensive realist framework is applied on the case of Ukraine in the following section. This will bring the involvement of the conflict’s
actors to light and further provide an understanding of the motives of Russia and the “West”, which refers to the EU and the US, driving them to interfere in the Ukraine (and its nation building process as elaborated on at a later stage in this paper). The application of an offensive realist framework to the Ukraine mainly follows Mearsheimer (2014 & 2015), who is the leading scholar of offensive realism, and his popular and acknowledged interpretation of the conflict.

Crimea, a casualty of the West’s attempt to march NATO and the European Union up to Russia’s doorstep, is surely lost for good.
(Mearsheimer, 2014)

Briefly speaking, it is argued that Russia’s aggressive interference was a reaction to Western containment or its power extension towards the Ukraine. Thus, the conflict in Ukraine has only been escalating that much due to self-interested power politics of great powers, such as Russia and the ‘West’ (and not that much due to internal processes driven by Ukrainians themselves) (Rodriguez, 2015). The main factors of ‘Western’ containment for Ukraine are considered the NATO enlargement, the EU expansion and the democracy promotion in the Ukraine by the West (Mearsheimer, 2014). Firstly, the planned integration of the Ukraine into the Western military alliance NATO has been announced at the NATO summit in 2008, in which the joint statement declared that the Ukraine will become a NATO member in the future. In turn, that triggered Russia to issue a warning, which stated that if Ukraine became a member of NATO, it would mean “strategic consequences for pan-European security” (Grushko (Russia’s deputy foreign minister) as cited in Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 3). Secondly, the EU has been trying to extend its power sphere to the East; at latest since the launch of its partnership Eastern programme in 2008, which aimed at integrating countries, such as the Ukraine, into the EU economy. Consequently, Russia felt threatened once more by the EU’s increasing sphere of influence, which was perceived among Russian officials as a forerunner of a NATO alliance. Thirdly and most interesting for this research, Mearsheimer (2014) argues that US and EU funding for pro-European NGO’s in the civil society of the Ukraine and the backing for the pro-democracy movements during the revolutions were instruments to influence Ukrainian politics and power in favour of the interests of the West, which would be the NATO and EU expansion.

Subsequently, the motives of the EU and US to expand their (hegemonial) power by military, economic and political alliances with the Ukraine - being a buffer state to the Russian border - and their containment of politics and society in Ukraine, could not be tolerated by Russia, which perceived those actions as a threat to its security and power. To halt the western containment and boost his bargaining power, Putin is “playing hardball” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 5) by exerting coercive force on the Ukraine, such as through the annexation of the crimea, applying extensive direct pressure on the Ukrainian government, supporting Russian separatists and Russian nationalism in Ukraine and raising the gas prices and by stationing a large army at the Ukrainian border. Although Russia’s power has declined extremly since the end of the Soviet Union, it still perceives itself as a ‘great power’, which “shall preserve the sovereignty of the nation by all
means” (Rodriguez, 2015, p.3). According to offensive realism, Russia - being a (self-perceived) great power- will always try to ensure or improve its hegemony and balance other hegemons, which in this case would be the ‘protection’ of its border or buffer states separating it from other hegemons. Following the assumption of an anarchical international system, Russia unsurprisingly makes use of drastic means of self-help to and merely acts self-interested; not taking into account violations of international law and the right of Ukrainian self-determination. From an offensive realist standpoint, the latter aspects are always subordinate to a state’s self-interest and might be violated if it is in a state’s best interest. Thus, when using a realist framework, the processes in the Ukraine are subject to greater powers, such as the West and Russia and there is no real, independent self-determination for the Ukraine.

Analysis

As we have seen above, both the “Western” powerblock and its Eastern counterpart have substantial interests in the future of Ukraine, and have taken action to steer the development of the crisis. However, how exactly have these external actors influenced the nation-building process of the young state?

It is firstly necessary to shortly break down the concept of “nation-building”. There is a great variety of definitions, but very broadly it can be described as the “process which leads to the formation of countries in which citizens feel a sufficient amount of commonality of interests, goals and preferences so that they do not wish to separate from each other” (Alesina & Reich 2013, p. 3).

Efforts of nation-building have usually been undertaken by national governments themselves in order to foster a national identity amongst their subjects, which acts as a kind of glue and helps achieving enduring political power (Shulman & Bloom, 2014). Thereby, a variety of techniques has historically been employed, such as adoption of a state religion and various national symbols, expulsion of minorities, linguistic assimilation and so on. Mass media and education have been proven useful tools for this end (ibid.). Because of the geopolitical significance of Ukraine, as explained above, external powers have interfered extensively with identity formation of the country by trying to foster their own ideas in the young, divided country. Thus, external actors have interfered with the nation building process in the Ukraine for their own benefit as suggested by offensive realism.

There are, according to Jacoby (2006), three ways in which external forces can influence the nation-building process of a new state, which he has termed inspiration, coalition and substitution. Inspiration refers from ideas, flowing from outside to inside, and constitutes an age-old impetus for constitutional change. This is a very soft mode of influence, and does not necessarily require effort by external powers (Jacoby, 2006, p. 628). Clearly, both sides to the conflict at hand have been inspired, the pro-Western parties by ideals of democracy and liberty, the Russian-backed rebels by more autocratic ideas of governance. The second stage of external influence has been termed coalition by Jacoby (2006), and refers to more interventionist
strategies in which outside actors strive to influence the choices of existing domestic actors through some kind of informal coalition (Jacoby 2006, p. 629). These strategies are employed predominantly by the Western power block, which attempts to actively spread Western values and promote democracy in Ukraine by funding pro-Western individuals and organizations: the United States, for example, are estimated to have invested more than $5 billion in Ukraine to help it achieve the “future it deserves” (Mearsheimer 2014, p. 80). As found out by Wilson (2006) Western funding for certain groups and NGOs during the Orange revolution furthermore supports the argument of Western ‘value containment’. Also, the admission of Ukraine into the NATO, even though very uncertain at this point, would constitute a very strong form of what Jacoby calls coalition.

Lastly, the technique employed by Russia to take influence on Ukraine is substitution (Jacoby, 2006). Substitution occurs when outsiders intervene directly and often with the help of the military, without active insider support, to push a reform into a desired direction (Jacoby 2006, p. 630). Putin, for instance, did so by ordering Russian forces onto the Crimean peninsula and subsequently incorporating it, by providing strong military support for the separatists in the Donbas region and by sharply rising the price of natural gas Russia sells to Ukraine (Mearsheimer 2014, pp. 81). Thus, we can see that the external actors to the conflict have used different techniques to steer the development of the Ukraine conflict: while the West is trying to actively spread pro-democratic ideas and values with the help of large funds, the East is taking up more drastic measures to proceed against the increasing sphere of Western influence on Ukraine.

However, we should not forget about the role of the Ukrainians themselves in the building of their nation. In the end of the day, it was Ukrainian citizens who went on the streets en masse and ultimately overthrew their government; if a rather Russian Ukraine was the status quo and the provocations by the West, including NATO and EU expansion and the spreading of liberal values, were the fuel, than Ukraine was the fire that ignited the conflict (Mearsheimer 2014, p. 80). It was also Ukrainian nationalists and historians who revived discussions about Ukraine’s place between East and West (McBride, 2016). Therefore, even if it is true that Russia and the West both have tried to assert influence on the situation, each in their own way, the nation-building process is not entirely steered by external powers, but also by internal movements and activists.

In practice, external influences and internal activism have resulted in a dramatic change of Ukrainian national identity: there is a notable rise of national pride, together with an increased confidence of citizens that they can change their country for the better, and an alienation from Russia. (Kulyk, 2016, p. 588). These changes can be attributed to the Euromaidan protests - supported by the West, but effectuated by the Ukrainians themselves - and to the aggression of Russia towards Ukraine. However, the popular perceptions are by far not uniform across the country; especially the North-Eastern regions, that is, the Donbas area, tend to identify more with Russia than the West (ibid, p. 607). Given that much of the Donbas is currently under Russian
control, with uncertain prospects of reintegration into Ukraine, the Ukrainian nation is likely to be somewhat smaller but more consolidated (ibid.)

6. Discussion

Conclusion

This paper aimed at a deeper understanding of recent developments of nationalism in the Ukraine. In particular, this paper focused on external influences on the Ukrainian nation building process by Russia and the West, such as US and the EU. Firstly, an historical analysis demonstrated that two main accounts of national history - by both the Ukrainian nationalists and the Russophile separatists - have each created their own complementing version of their past and nation building to justify their claim to the region. The use of an offensive realist framework, secondly, has suggested the interests of the actors involved in the conflict and thus offered an explanation why Russia and the ‘West’ are motivated to interfere with the Ukrainian nation building process. Briefly speaking, from an offensive realist perspective Russia’s interference in the Ukraine is caused by Western containment (EU, NATO, Funding) or its power extension towards the Ukraine, which is seen as a geo strategic buffer state by Russia to the ‘West’. Finally, this paper’s analysis demonstrated that Russia and the ‘West’ to a differing, but significant degree interfere in Ukrainian’s nation building process in three ways: by inspiration, coalition, and substitution. However, it was also pointed out that the nation-building process in Ukraine is not only steered by external powers, but also and crucially by internal movements and activists.

Limitations

There are various aspects, which limit this paper’s conclusion. First of all, it would have been interesting to elaborate more on the current national identity and nation building in the Ukraine to further deepen and differentiate the analysis. However, the scope of this paper as well as the restricted and low access to current academic sources in English, made further exploration very difficult. Therefore, future research in English could for example cooperate with the Ukrainian Institute of Sociology, which publishes a relatively large amount of findings about the aforementioned themes in Ukrainian, in order to provide access and deeper understanding of the situation in the Ukraine.

Another important limitation of this paper derives from choosing offensive realism as an analytical framework to understand the conflict and interests of all actors involved in the Ukraine crisis. Although, this choice is found appropriate by the authors of this paper as well as by leading scholars of International relations, it naturally comes with the same weakness as every singular theory in IR: offensive realism can only look from one angle at the conflict and makes predictions based on its cores assumptions. Other IR theories, such as other streams of realism or paradigms, such as constructivism or liberalism, might view and interpret the conflict and its actors differently and might also differ on the argument to what extend or whether external powers interfere at all. For example, McFaul (2014) criticizes that an offensive realist
perspective on the events of the Ukraine does not sufficiently take the internal political dynamics of Russia into account and therefore misinterprets the conflict and the state’s interests. According to McFaul (2014) Putin, who was pressured by increasing domestic protests in Russia, recreated a former enemy, such as the ‘West’, to mobilize an electoral base in Russia. Yet, since this paper rather was interested in demonstrating that external actors were generally interfering in the Ukraine, than in clarifying all potential aspects of the complex conflict, future research could incorporate a multi-theoretical IR framework, which would have exceeded the scope and complexity of this paper.

References


