

Ukraine: Let's start a real European debate

✠ By Václav Klaus

Introduction: The difficult heritage of the past

The state of Ukraine today is a sad outcome of Stalin's attempts to mix up nations and boundaries, disrupt natural historical ties and create a new Soviet man by turning original nations into mere ethnic residua and historical leftovers. Taking it into consideration is the starting point of our thinking, something that is sadly missing in the political debates today.

The cacophony of commentaries and statements to recent Ukrainian developments misses the point that the first and foremost contribution to the current dramatic situation there is the obvious political, economic and social failure of Ukraine as an independent state. This failure, in our view, has been caused by the following factors:

1. Ukraine as we know it today, has no historical tradition of statehood, and in over twenty years of its existence the country failed to create a state that would be accepted by the bulk of its population. The state was not born out of its people's efforts to gain self-determination and sovereignty, it came into being through the dissolution of the Soviet Union by its political leadership, and emancipation of the artificial Soviet republics, created by Moscow in their then valid borders.

2. The largely passive population's anti-Moscow sentiment was exacerbated by Gorbachev's perestroika and its catastrophic results. The local Soviet party nomenklatura also feared Yeltsin's policies aimed to crush the old system.

3. At the beginning of its independence, Ukraine functioned under the leadership of the Russian-speaking Soviet elite from the eastern part of the land as a sort of a Russian B-state, a part of the vast post Soviet space with enormous potential. At least on paper: 52 million people (second to Russia), its industrial base in the Donbas, the biggest agricultural potential on the European continent, the key ports of the Black Sea, Crimea, a relatively well educated elite and central Europe next to its door.

4. The new state emerged from an essentially artificial administrative portion of the Soviet totalitarian Union that wanted to show the world how the national issue can be resolved once and for all by replacing individual nations with the „Soviet people“. The Russian and russified areas of the east and south of Ukraine (with three hundred years of Russian history behind them) were artificially linked to the originally Polish Galicia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia acquired by Stalin after World War II, lands that had never belonged to any of the old Slav states in the East.

5. The independent Ukrainian state did not exist before 1991, unless we consider as such the brief period of civil war after the 1917 October revolution, when unsuccessful attempts at Ukrainian independence featured such controversial figures as general Skoropadsky, atamans Machno and Petljura, or Stepan Bandera in World War II. Their legacy (anti-semitism, affinity to German Nazis), is considered very controversial outside the nationalistic western Ukraine.

6. Older historical traditions speak in favor of strong ties to Russia – the Kievan Rus period, the acceptance of orthodox Christianity, or the tradition of the Zaporozhian cossacs who fought the Turks and the Poles and brought Ukraine of the time into tsarist Russia. The common Russo-Ukrainian experience of the Soviet times as well as World War II created strong human, social, economic and political bonds that cannot be easily replaced.

7. More than twenty years of Ukrainian independence that followed, were not enough to create a common Ukrainian identity and convince the people of this very heterogeneous land that independent Ukraine is the right social formation, fulfilling their national aspirations. Such ambition is seen in especially among ethnic Ukrainians living in the west (Galicia, Volhynia) who accentuate the tragic experience of the Soviet era (deportations, gulags, famine), harbor anti-Russian feelings and wish to build Ukraine as a Ukrainian nation state. The position of a „second“ Russian state as sought by Presidents Kravchuk and Kuchma is unacceptable to them. It is no coincidence that this backward and weak western part of Ukraine was the moving force behind the 2004 Orange Revolution as well as the Maidan protests in 2014. By overthrowing Janukovych, the nationalist western part of the land assumed exclusive power attempting to disrupt the long, traditional Ukrainian ties to Russia, and replace it with exclusive orientation on the West, the EU and the United States. However, experience shows that western Ukraine is not strong enough to fulfill these plans – the economic weight of its eastern part so far prevailed every time.

Ukraine's Russians – members of a great cultural nation, formerly dominant throughout the region – do not and cannot share the nationalist ambitions of western Ukrainians. The disruption of close ties with Russia, generally wealthier, more successful and orderly today, is unthinkable to them. They do not see the Soviet era as an occupation by a foreign power, they consider themselves as victors of World War II, not victims. Bandera's sympathizers are traitors and fascists in their eyes, a state built on such legacy is unacceptable. Like Russians, they mistrust the West and do not want to be part of blocks aimed against Russia. Militant anti-russism of western-Ukrainian nationalists is insulting and threatening to them. Due to the Soviet tradition, this part of the population has long been indifferent to national issues. However, present developments make this group more aware of national feelings

and the mood among them is more and more antagonistic in that respect.

After twenty years of independence, Ukraine is a divided country on the threshold of economic bankruptcy. It is home to two nations with different and probably antagonistic visions of the future, two nations growing apart every day. Both these nations look up to the world outside with unrealistic expectations – one to the West, the other to Russia.

Ukraine in its current shape could have been saved by several decades of peaceful development with a modest and sophisticated foreign policy, respecting the geopolitical position of the country and gradually improving its economy and standard of living. None of that was in the cards for Ukraine. Attempts at radical change represent a fundamental threat in such a fragile, heterogenous and politically sensitive country. Unfortunately that is what is happening in Ukraine today, with all the risks it entails for Europe and the world.

Part II: Ukraine's failed transformation

As argued above, Ukraine was born after the downfall of Communism as an essentially non-historical state, cursed with a fundamental identity problem from day one. That has always been a serious hinderance in the country's development, and it remains so still today.

Western Europe and The United States, or rather the politicians in that part of the world, think it is okay, all it takes is to „introduce democracy and the state of law“. Till this day they have not learned anything from the fact the repeated attempts to „export democracy“ have failed and that even two decades of massive western support to Bosnia and Herzegovina, artificially created after the disintegration of Yugoslavia bore no fruit. Not to mention the Arab Spring.

Ukraine has not implemented a consistent post-Communist

transformation, the way it was carried out in other post-Communist countries. There was no political transformation. No standard system of political parties was introduced, and the Ukrainian parliament is still not a standard parliament. Repeated TV footage of fist-fighting deputies gives a good example. The „Orange Revolution“ (inspired abroad, again) took place twenty years after our „velvet“ counterpart, but even this delay did not bring about the necessary change.

There was no consistent economic transformation, although the communist system was forsaken. The outcome of that was the seizure of the economy by oligarch clans, stagnation, industrial decay, high unemployment, continued dependence on Russia, etc. The comparison with Belarus is revealing, whether we like Mr. Lukashenko or not. After the fall of communism, both countries started out with comparable results, and today the per capita GDP in Belarus is 50 percent higher. This comparison is almost a „controlled experiment“. It is also plain to see that over 5 million people or 10 percent of Ukraine's population had left the country over the last twenty years.

The inexorable duels between Jushchenko, Tymoshenko and Yanukovych (leaving the minor players aside) led to no good. The enormous wealth of politicians and oligarchs as presented in the media is something unimaginable in Eastern Europe, much less in the Czech Republic.

The amount of frustration is high enough to see even for those who are not experts on Ukraine. At any rate, this is a fragile, unstable country easily vulnerable by outside interference. It does not have to be a military intervention, political interference is enough. All it takes is incitement of unrest, riots, plotting groups of population against one another, populist games against all local authorities, incitement of envy, mutual charges of corruption and theft, and last but not least the unleashing of nationalist conflicts or downright hatred.

We think all of the above has been going on in Ukraine. And still is.

Part III: What happened in Ukraine and around it

The Ukrainian dispute can be interpreted in a more simple and obvious way if we turn it into a model albeit schematic, where details disappear and the bare skeleton of the issue remains.

Model A: an authentic popular uprising seeking democracy, independence and association with Europe has taken place

This model is based on a probably correct thesis that Ukrainians are deeply and justifiably dissatisfied with the situation in their country. They see the reason for that in the actions of their incompetent and corrupt political representation (which they repeatedly choose in elections that have basic democratic characteristics despite all the existing problems), a government that refuses the EU association agreement instead of focusing on “bringing the country to Europe” and tough bargaining with Russia on gas prices and other things.

People stage authentic mass demonstrations in the streets. They do not mind weeks or months of freezing temperatures. When peaceful protests are not enough, the demonstrations get more intense spontaneously (although the government makes all kinds of concessions and takes no repressive action against them). The demonstrators are joined by trained and highly armed individuals as well as domestic and foreign organized groups, while Russian support to the movement is absent. There is general assumption that Russia is happy about this process of destabilization in this important neighboring country, if not directly supportive of it.

After the demonstrators score victory in the streets of Kiev, after the democratically elected president flees the country an allegedly truly popular government is created, Russia's army intervenes and occupies Crimea, just like Hitler occupied

Czechoslovakia in 1939 (its western part) or Brezhnev did in 1968 (this time entire Czechoslovakia). In 1939 and 1968 the democrats of the world did not protest strongly enough, therefore it has to be done properly now. Till the day democracy wins. The Hitler-Brezhnev-Putin line is plain to see and those who do not see it, did not see it then, either.

Model B: Dissatisfaction in Ukraine was used for a new confrontation of the West with Russia

Model B starts the same way as Model A. The Ukrainians are deeply and justifiably dissatisfied with the situation in their country and show it in various forms. However we are talking about a country that:

- is not authentic Europe (however difficult it is to define Europe's boundaries)
- is bordering Russia (though the actual borderline is not authentic)
- has been part of Russia or Russian dominated territory for decades
- has millions of Russians living in it (more than one third of its population) and has to find some sort of a modus vivendi with Russia and confirm it again and again.

This repeatedly surfacing crisis has been chosen as a pretext to bring about a new confrontation between the West and Russia, by all those who have a reason to despise Russia. These people have known full well that destabilization of an important (largest and most populous) neighbor is something that Russia cannot accept easily.

- that is why they have steered the existing dissatisfaction more and more towards Russia
- that is why they have backed the arguments coming from western Ukraine

- that is why they have fostered the conflict between western and eastern Ukraine, something that to a large extent amounts to a conflict between Ukrainians and Russians
- that is why they have misinterpreted real economic relations between Ukraine and Russia
- that is why they have painted the picture of Russia as an expanding superpower that is anxiously waiting for an opportunity to occupy Ukraine.

We are no passionate advocates of Russia and its leader and we know it would be naïve and absurd to be idealistic about long-term Russian interests, but we agree with the recent words of Henry Kissinger who said that “demonization of Vladimir Putin is not a policy; it is an alibi for the absence of one”. This is exactly what is happening in the United States and Western Europe.

After the Kiev putsch was carried out (unconstitutionally for legalistic purists), after all those who dared have a different opinion faced brutal violence, after the de facto expulsion of the democratically elected president who did not dare act against violent demonstrators, and after the concerns of the Russian part of Ukrainian population started increasing steadily, the most specific and geographically limited, formally autonomous part of Ukraine – the Crimea – became subject to a referendum (clearly with consent and silent joy on the Russian part), in which an overwhelming part of the population took part, and resolutely expressed the wish of the population of Crimea to cease their association with Ukraine (where they never belonged before Khrushchev’s intervention in 1954). It is obvious that these people did not feel like remaining in a vacuum and wished to return to Russia. It is equally obvious Russia can be happy about it (despite substantial short-term problems), but the sequence of events was different from what we find in mainstream media purporting that Russia annexed Crimea on its own will.

In line with its interests, the West interprets the fact that Crimea became part of Russia as an example of renewed Russian imperialism. In a recent conversation, a good friend of ours who has lived in Germany since the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, refused to listen to our arguments, but conceded one important fact: ever since the occupation of his homeland, his hatred towards Russia (although it should be hatred towards communism and the Soviet Union), has been so intense, that it prevents him from even reading traditional 19th century Russian literature. We consider this to be irrational, but our fear is that this is the mainstream interpretation of the Ukrainian situation and Russia's intentions in the Czech Republic, Europe and probably America, too. That is why our polemic is not in defense of Russia and its president, but an attempt to avert risky steps towards a new cold war of which we and our freedoms would be the inevitable victims.

This "model" description of two different views of the Ukrainian crisis can be further developed, supplemented or enriched, but we are convinced that it is good for basic orientation. Let us add that it is not surprising to us, that the majority of the Crimean population (consisting largely of Russians) does not wish to remain part of a state that is facing bankruptcy, and is being controlled more and more by people and groups from the western, i.e. non-Russian part of Ukraine, people whose dominant policy is to oppose Russia and the Russians. It is no surprise that the people of Crimea want to be part of the wealthier and more successful Russia.

It is equally important to see that the Ukrainian army in the Crimea hardly put up any resistance, allowed itself to be disarmed and largely crossed over to the other side – the Russian army. That is another illustration of the Ukrainian state's disintegration.

Part IV. Legalistic fundamentalism and "real life"

In connection with the continued disintegration of Ukraine – the separation of Crimea and its incorporation into Russia, the ongoing declarations of all kinds of separatist Russian “republics” and further demands for referenda aimed at separating other parts of eastern Ukraine – western commentators present various legal arguments asserting that such steps are in contradiction with the legal and constitutional framework of Ukraine today, and therefore illegal and unacceptable. This, too, has to be put in the appropriate context, without trying to look like experts on Ukrainian law. Because that is not the point.

These largely academic arguments may be correct when analyzing the illegality of some of the separatist moves, but that is only one half of the truth. Real life is always ahead of the law and the law adjusts to it only retroactively. The changed reality induces new laws and these are by definition only temporary, too. Real life and real needs usually find their ways, and very seldom the legislative changes that come with them manage to keep up.

In recent history, there was only one case of a truly constitutional and legally implemented division of a state, namely that of the Czechoslovak federation. The disintegration of Yugoslavia, and later Serbia as well as the Soviet Union, was chaotic by nature, often taking place in confrontation and violence with many cases of *fait accompli*. There is no point in analyzing that. The majority of modern countries in Europe and around the world have gained their independence as a result of a violent struggle, ignoring the law of the time. To deny the people this right by pointing out the illegality of separatism is impossible. Failing to accept that, we would have to deny the legality of the United States or indeed our own state, that was born in contradiction with the constitution of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918, too.

International acceptance of the changing borders is not a legal issue first and foremost, it depends more on the actual

balance of power in the country, region or the world. In that respect, modern times differ from ancient history only ever so slightly. Should we insist on international and legal assessment of this kind of changes, we would find ourselves in a fatal trap of double standards and contradictions.

It is clear that chaos, anarchy and economic crisis make it easy for the West as well as Russia to interfere in Ukrainian affairs. It is also not surprising that most ethnic Russians, dissatisfied with the unfavorable conditions in Ukraine and fearing the future, look up to the relatively wealthy, stable and powerful Russia. The fact that most of them have no reason for loyalty towards Ukraine, and massively speak out in favor of joining Russia in a referendum, can surprise only the most biased observer. There is therefore no reason to cast doubt over such stance by rejecting individual conditions of the respective referendum.

There is no way to maintain Ukraine's unity through legal arguments, laws and the constitution. It is equally impossible to do so through the very democratic procedures such as the elections, whether parliamentary or presidential. Should the west overpower the east in an election or vice versa, it will not be a solution even if the winner has a democratic majority and is therefore legitimate. Ukraine's future can only lie in the victory of a broad Ukraine-wide project satisfying both sides and that is increasingly improbable, given the escalating tensions and increasing outside pressures.

Part V. The abuse of Ukrainian developments for the acceleration of European unification (and weakening of democracy in Europe)

The Ukrainian developments will have a number of direct or indirect consequences in the short and long term, from the political as well as economic point of view.

Short-term consequences of the economic kind are obvious for

the Czech Republic – a decreasing number of tourists from Russia and Ukraine, less business in spas of western Bohemia, the slowing down of certain economic and investment activities, possible complications in energy supplies from the East. That is certainly unpleasant for certain concrete Czech businesses, but probably not fatal for the country as a whole. Sooner or later activities of this kind will go back to the old levels. Again, we know it is difficult for those affected businesses who do business with Russia and Ukraine to take this relaxed position. They have to be worried and we do not expect the state to offer any compensation.

The non-economic consequences are worse and much more dangerous. International politics will be radicalized, there will be a new level of confrontation between the West and the East and the conflict between western Europe (that we will side with) and Putin's increasingly self-confident Russia will be ever sharper. This increased international tension is a definite disadvantage for the Czech Republic, a small country in the vicinity of the symbolic borderline between the East and the West, and we will pay for it.

The European political mainstream, represented by the elites in Brussels makes a calculation that the Ukrainian crisis can be used to strengthen European centralization and unification, especially the direction of a joint foreign policy (designed to silence the still differing foreign policies of individual EU states) and the creation of a joint European army, an idea resisted by most member states so far. This further toughening of European unification and centralization, which many of us consider unacceptable even today, goes against the real interests of the Czech Republic regardless of the fact that President Zeman thinks otherwise. We fear the limitation of civil rights, especially freedom of speech, and the freedom of dissent from official opinion.

A large part of the European political mainstream (although much less in Germany and even less in the south of the EU)

tries, together with the United States, to turn Russia into a “bogey man” in the East, something that is in the American strategic interest. Ukraine is only a tool in that respect. That, too, is not in our interest and there are no benefits in it for us. Maybe there are some benefits there for a small group of the little Czech “neocons” who keep propping up their careers in the belated battles against communism and Russian imperialism, careers that are only made possible by the fact that parts of our population still lend their ears to such propaganda. It is clearly a surrogate activity, manifesting an obvious absence of a positive political agenda.

Photo by DrabikPany 