



# Ukraine: Truth—the First Casualty

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## **T&B – Ukraine: Truth – the First Casualty**

*How do wars begin?*

*Wars begin when, first, politicians lie to journalists, then they believe what they read in the press...*

**Karl Kraus, 1912**

The bombastic and totally counterproductive Western response to the crisis which followed the nationalist coup d'état in Kiev, at least in part stage-managed from Washington and Brussels with that signature mix of arrogance and duplicity witnessed in the buildup to previous imperial exercises, represents a tragic failure of Western diplomacy, which has attained none of its presumed goals. This crisis once again highlights the deeply pernicious role of the press – which in any crisis reliably abandons all pretense of objectivity or balance at the exact moment when these are most needed. Jingoistic and violently partisan, it assists politicians in the fine art of painting themselves into tight corners, drawing them into increasingly grotesque posturing so as to appear resolute and manly to an electorate these same media have whipped up to a fever pitch; shrill rhetoric drowns out any hint of moderation, much less any attempt to understand the motives and goals of the adversary. A psychotic “them-or-us” mentality prevails – the opponent is ridiculed and dehumanized. Diplomacy degenerates into a shouting match. Wars begin.

With a precious few exceptions, Western media coverage of the current crisis has involved a single, unitary message – a fable of brave, freedom-loving Ukrainians striving to break the Russian yoke – while ignoring the numerous inconvenient truths: that Russians form the second largest ethnic and linguistic group in Ukraine and are a majority in the Eastern provinces; that

Crimea is overwhelmingly Russian, both historically and ethnically; that Yanukovich, as distasteful as he might be, remains the democratically-elected president of Ukraine; and, finally, that he was driven into exile by a violent opposition under the control of the openly neo-fascist parties Pravyi Sektor and Svoboda.

Reading the “Pravda-on-the-Potomac” (d.b.a. The Washington Post) and other corporate-owned media one encounters the tacit assumption that, alone among countries, Russia has no legitimate interests in her own backyard; that she should be expected to passively accept Western-sponsored regime-change as Kiev, the historical cradle of Russian civilization and part of a single country within our generation, is drawn into a hostile military alliance.

The conflict has been conveniently but fraudulently framed as an attempt to stop “Russian expansionism” – ignoring the fact that despite repeated promises made to Gorbachev NATO would never be extended to Russia’s borders, Russia has been pushed back continuously for the past 20 years. US Neocons make no secret of wishing to include neighboring Georgia and Ukraine into an anti-Russian pact; can the reader imagine the US response were Canada and Mexico to cement a hostile military alliance with China?

Having nothing to fear from the tame US media, John Kerry can angrily fustigate countries for “invading other countries on trumped-up pretexts” without fear of ridicule – conveniently ignoring the fraudulent Iraqi WMD dossier, the invasions of Cambodia and Nicaragua kept secret from the US Congress, or indeed, dozens of other military interventions, covert or overt, on equally flimsy grounds. The Western powers fail to respect international law except when convenient; it is profoundly disingenuous to expect Russia to be the sole power to act otherwise. As Ukraine fractures, Washington is demanding the respect for international boundaries – a consideration ignored during the NATO operation in Kosovo; if Catalonia or Scotland can hold referenda to split from their respective countries, then the principle of self-determination has at least equal legitimacy with that of territorial integrity.

Yes, the reader will argue, raw power remains the basis for international law – but then why not drop the hypocritical discourse and simply assert that they do it *because they can do*? And, especially, why does the press signally fail at what should be its *raison d’être* – not to cheerlead, not to carry water for those in power, but to tenaciously challenge its own camp?

Democracy, in the absence of a properly and objectively informed populace, and of a political process that allows that populace to effectively influence policy, is a sham. The mainstream media have been clearly complicit in the steady decline in the level of US political discourse – thus bearing much responsibility for the resultant disastrous policy errors. Perhaps the best remaining hope for pluralism lies in the rise of the social media and alternative sources – internet blogs, RT Television, Telesud, etc. While these too have their own agendas, they provide a vital service by re-injecting a note of diversity into a landscape which, given the corporate ownership of mass media, would otherwise be totally monochromatic.

## **Ukraine Splinters as East meets West**

As shown by the leaked tape of US Assistant Secretary Victoria Nuland talking with US Ambassador Pyatt, the Ukrainian uprising was openly stage-managed from Washington. What is most extraordinary about the notorious “Fuck the EU” tape, is not that she contemptuously dismisses Europe as unworthy of her time, but that she clearly enunciates Washington’s plan to dictate the composition of a new Ukrainian government, dismissing certain populist Ukrainian politicians as “unsuitable” – a passingly odd definition of “democracy”. Meanwhile, over the past three months, a never-ending stream of US and EU officials including Ashton, Nuland, Van Rompuy and McCain filed through Kiev in support of the violent demonstrations; the reader is

invited to imagine how the US would have reacted to visits by Russian politicians encouraging the Occupy movement to storm the State Department and burn the Senate building.

Like Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia – artificial creations cobbled together in the wake of World Wars – there is in fact no “Ukrainian” nation; modern-day Ukraine is split more-or-less equally between Russian and Ukrainian linguistic groups, with 40% of the population ethnic Russian, speaking Russian at home, and moving freely back and forth across the border for reasons of family, work or study; President Yanukovich’s win in the last presidential elections confirms this. Hailing from the Russian-speaking East of the country, he was elected by a majority of Ukrainians following the failure of the Western-sponsored Orange coalition. Although Yanukovich proved to be a bumbling and corrupt fool and clearly deserved to be voted out of office, he remains the lawfully elected president of Ukraine. Regular presidential elections were scheduled within 12 months, and it was by no means certain that he would lose – thus, the coup d’état.

The portrayal of Yanukovich as Putin’s puppet is a convenient fiction, rendered credible only by the constant retelling. In fact, Mr Putin was well aware of Yanukovich’s incompetence, but could do little to prevent his election; it is enough to see his body language in the company of the Ukrainian President to sense his ill-disguised contempt. Putin’s preferred presidential candidate in the last election was, in fact, Orange Revolution heroine Yulia Tymoshenko – a famously corrupt billionaire oligarch known locally as the “gas princess”. Deeply pragmatic and concerned primarily with the economic interests of her own business faction, and despite some past frictions with Russia, she had repeatedly proved amenable to negotiated solutions and maintained reasonably friendly relations. Unfortunately, Tymoshenko was too closely associated with the abject failure of the Orange Revolution – which collapsed into public feuding between the various oligarchic factions against a background of growing economic distress; Viktor Yanukovich thus emerged triumphant in an election described as “fair” by international observers.

It proved a short-lived victory. Given Ukraine’s increasingly dire economic situation, Yanukovich faced a series of equally distasteful options: 1. The politically catastrophic reforms demanded by the IMF, which would compound the already severe social distress; or, 2. Accession to the Customs Union with Russia and Kazakhstan, which would have exposed his oligarchic faction to competition with the far more powerful Russian oligarchs; or, 3. Signature of the free-trade agreement with the EU, which, given the extremely meager financial package on offer, would have required huge cuts in social welfare, while also decimating the weak, post-Soviet Ukrainian industrial fabric – no match for the German export machine, reducing Ukraine to a third-world agricultural exporter dependent upon the West for its manufactured products.

## **The Phantom of Accession**

A deeply impoverished country of 50 million, Ukraine is also one of the most energy-inefficient states on earth, requiring huge quantities of Russian gas for households and industry alike. Given the gaping current account deficit and an antiquated industrial plant entirely dependent on the Russian and Kazakh export markets, it requires continual inflow of foreign capital to survive. With the EU struggling to integrate the far-smaller Eastern European accession states, while also propping up the bankrupt PIGS, Ukraine has slightly less chance of joining the EU than does even Turkey – precisely nil; Germany would never bankroll it.

Knowing this, and in an attempt to retain power, Yanukovich long sought to play off Europe, Russia and China against each other, hoping to gain enough from each to keep the others at bay – a three-way game of liars’ poker for which he signally lacked the requisite political skill. Early in his presidential term, he infuriated Putin by refusing to join the Customs Union, while jailing his defeated rival Tymoshenko on charges of abuse of office for having signed an unfavourable gas supply deal with Russia.

Yanukovich's Chinese initiatives left him almost empty-handed (although Beijing did provide \$3bn in pre-export finance for agricultural products – for which it is now suing in international tribunals). Meanwhile, for several years he engaged in painstaking negotiations with Brussels for an EU “Association” Agreement, possibly as a scarecrow to frighten Russia into providing a more generous bailout. Only this last initiative encountered some success – having rejected a humiliatingly low offer of financial assistance from Brussels, Yanukovich turned to Moscow, which duly offered a much-needed \$15bn in financial aid, along with a 35% discount on its gas imports. That offer has now been superseded by events, leaving Ukraine on the brink of economic collapse and default.

## Into the Maelstrom

Given his disappointment with the EU offer, Yanukovich delayed signing the Association Agreement *in extremis* before turning to Russia for assistance – this after having misled his own electorate into believing that they were about to be issued with EU passports. Large-scale demonstrations broke out in Kiev. While these were initially peaceful, as the neo-fascist right gained a leading role in the movement, the riots became increasingly violent, culminating in some 100 deaths, largely among the badly trained and ill-equipped riot police. It seems likely that Yanukovich could have prevailed, either by allowing the demonstrations to gradually die down in the cold Kiev winter, or by the sort of firm policing regularly seen in European countries faced with violent protests. Instead, he fell squarely between two chairs, using just enough force to provoke the demonstrators – while allowing them to maintain their camps at Maidan Square and gradually acquire weaponry, as well as military training from their Polish and US advisers.

Despite pitched battles with the Berkut riot police, the situation on the ground reached a stalemate, with the Maidan coalition coming under severe time pressure to bring the crisis to a head before the end of the Sochi Winter Olympics – during which time Russia's hands would presumably be tied. Indeed, from the first days of the Winter Games the Kiev riots turned increasingly violent – with live gunfire claiming victims on both sides. Finally, on the last days of the Games, otherwise-unidentified snipers began firing indiscriminately, killing scores of demonstrators and police alike.

Who were these snipers – and what did they seek to achieve? Perhaps some clarity is provided by the recently leaked tape of an intercepted phone call between Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet and EU policy chief Catherine Ashton, the authenticity of which has been confirmed by the Foreign Ministry of Estonia (not a country otherwise suspected of pro-Russian sentiments). In this conversation, Mr Paet, having just returned from Ukraine, informed Ashton that during his trip to Kiev he had learned that the snipers who killed protestors and police alike had been paid for by the far-right faction of the EuroMaidan anti-government camp. What is perhaps most striking about the conversation is Ashton's reaction – she was neither surprised nor did she seem at all put out: perfectly indifferent to the treachery of the faction the EU was backing, she appeared concerned only with political positioning. (It is best to listen to the original tapes rather than relying upon media spin – they are available on [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1hlm01\\_ukraine-appel-intercepte-catherine-ashton-urmas-paet-26-02-14-vostfr\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1hlm01_ukraine-appel-intercepte-catherine-ashton-urmas-paet-26-02-14-vostfr_news) or Google: Paet, Ashton, snipers, Dailymotion.)

Although an investigation has been called for, in the current political climate it is most unlikely that the truth will be known; any support for Paet's claims would be viewed as treachery by the heavily armed far-right factions in Kiev. In any event, the snipers clearly achieved their aim. As the violence climaxed and civil war threatened – rebuffed by Russia, which refused his request for military assistance and under intense pressure from the US and the EU – Yanukovich signed an agreement promising a return to the 2004 constitution, appointing a government of national

reconciliation, and calling early presidential elections.

All was in vain. Encouraged by US backers who now smelled blood, and with the Ukrainian police demoralized by the government's constant vacillation and in disorderly retreat, as Yanukovich fled Kiev an ad hoc government took power, with four ministries going to the neo-fascist parties.

Carried away with a sense of triumphalism, among the first acts of the new regime in Kiev was to miscalculate badly, revoking the laws granting linguistic equality to Russians, thus confirming the subservience of the Eastern regions to Kiev. Predictably, the Russian provinces of the Eastern moiety appealed to Moscow for protection against the Banderites (memories are long in this part of the world; Bandera's alignment with the Nazis – on whose behalf his faction perpetrated some of the worst savagery in WWII Ukraine and for whom they continued to fight until 1949 – has not been forgotten). The Crimean parliament promptly declared independence, requesting inclusion into the Russian Federation, with a popular referendum overwhelming confirming their bid. The massive scenes of public rejoicing that broke out after the vote confirm the overwhelming popularity of this reunification.

## A Lose-Lose proposition

Given the political dysfunction of the EU, the moderate European states with a substantial economic and diplomatic stake in maintaining good relations with Russia, in particular Germany and Italy, have been repeatedly outmaneuvered by hardline factions nostalgic for the certainties of the Cold War; European foreign policy has been hijacked by hardline Polish and Swedish diplomacy supported by Washington (see the leaked Nuland tapes).

In late 2013, somewhat naively assuming his European partners to be seriously interested in a cooperative relationship, Vladimir Putin declared that there was no reason to cast the fight for Ukraine as a winner-takes-all exercise – both Europe and Russia had legitimate interests, and economic participation in the Customs Union was not incompatible with ties to the EU, calling instead for three-way negotiations; Brussels refused to even consider the option, and restate the choice as a stark either/or, without regard to the huge costs of restructuring the Ukrainian economy.

Confronted with the spectre of immediate default, and unable to pay for vital imports, the new Ukrainian regime has requested an emergency aid package of E35bn – this essentially to cover debt service and to keep the lights on. Add to this an end to the discount on Russian gas and the loss of Russian export markets, and the bill quickly rises above E50bn. Given the fact that Europe allowed Cyprus and Greece – members of both the EU and Eurozone – to default, it seems politically untenable for them to now provide sufficiently massive financial support to Ukraine, especially since there is no indication that anything will stop the haemorrhage. Ukraine may be important for Europe, but it is not vital – Russia is the only country with sufficient skin in the game to be willing and able to provide sufficient funding. Despite the triumphalist rhetoric, a Western-orientated Ukraine cut off from Russia is likely to more resemble Albania than Poland.

Thankfully, warfare is no longer viewed as a desirable outcome, and Western threats involve sanctions rather than missiles. This public belligerence has proved considerably worse than useless since the Ukraine is existential for Russia – Putin cannot back down, whatever the cost. At present, the sanctions appear to be *a minima*, designed to save face, creating domestic political cover with minimal damage. Indeed, harsh economic sanctions would provoke counter-sanctions – in the extreme, were Russian gas exports to be halted European industry would shut down within two months; a stop in Russian oil exports would ultimately send crude above \$200, tanking the global economy; Russia is a vital supplier of industrial metals – Boeing cannot build planes without Russian titanium; Russia's \$2trn economy is the world's fifth-largest consumer market, and countries like Italy, already teetering on the verge of renewed recession, would be severely damaged by a closing of the Russian market



While a decrease in Western financial flows is already palpable, Beijing is now Russia's largest trading partner and the main source of external finance; cooperation in the energy, financial and diplomatic spheres will shift from Europe to China. Given the contempt with which Russian interests are treated by the West, Putin is left little choice but his own "reset": Russia's new alignment will be not his preferred option – as a "bridge" between Asia and Europe – but as an integral part of the new Chinese geopolitical bloc. Given China's own sensitivity to questions of separatism, her UN diplomacy has been studiously neutral, however the official Chinese media have expressed strong support for Russia, placing blame for the crisis squarely with the West. Russian military technology and diplomatic support will prove invaluable to China as she extends her influence in the Pacific basin.

### ***Defeat – Snatched from the Jaws of Victory***

*It is something worse than a crime – it is a mistake...*

**Talleyrand**

The tragedy of modern Western diplomacy is its hijack by – on the one hand – the European accession States – Balts and Poles, along with Sweden (the former, at least, bear a understandable historical grudge, although it is now frankly archaic), and on the other, the US Neocon faction, interested only in the politics of raw power and domination, with nothing to lose and much to gain by conflict in Eurasia. The incompetence of the resulting diplomacy has been breathtaking to behold; it should be intuitively obvious that to publicly menace one's adversary, mixing insults and threats, may perhaps work when dealing with a small nation, disarmed and impoverished, but when dealing with an angry nuclear power forced upon the defensive, it is wildly counterproductive; indeed, had the NATO powers wished to obtain the partition of Ukraine and a split across Europe, they would have behaved no differently.

Results were those to be expected. Publicly threatening Putin – who was presumably already feeling hard done-by after signing an agreement with his Western partners requiring a climb-down by Yanukovich, only to find that agreement broken within 24 hours, and who has grown weary of the systematically dishonest and tendentious treatment of Russia in the Western media – essentially ensured a hardline response. Any residual notion that the West intended to deal fairly with Russia was shredded by their furious rhetoric over Crimea, rejecting an overwhelming vote for independence as "illegal" while at the same time welcoming the violent overthrow of the Ukrainian government by an armed mob.

The Ukrainian Putsch will likely prove a tactical victory but a strategic defeat. Even a cursory glance at Russian history suggests that the West is now repeating the errors of Napoleon and Hitler – Russians are idealists, and there is simply no amount of pain that will force them to concede when they are convinced of the rightness of their case; negotiation would have been the far more productive option.

### ***Towards Asia***

Despite some obfuscation in the media, Beijing's position is crystal clear: In a recent policy statement, Xinhua, seen as the official organ of the Chinese Government, wrote:

*"... Shortly afterwards, Russia struck back. Now, with Russian military personnel deployed in eastern Ukraine to protect Russia's legitimate interests and pro-Russian regions clamoring for secession from Kiev, Ukraine is teetering on the brink of total chaos and disintegration."*

The Foreign Ministry of India has opined similarly – some 20 other countries have sided with Russia; Mr Kerry’s statement that “no other country supports Russia” is demonstrably and characteristically false. It is in his interests to present “The West” as synonymous with “the World” – it no longer is.

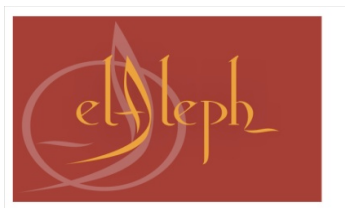
Future historians will no doubt puzzle long and hard over the folly of Western diplomacy in the decades following the fall of the USSR. Rather than seeking to draw Russia closer to the West to which she naturally aspired, welcoming her into a community of equals, the old, Cold-War reflexes proved irresistible – with no natural lobby to promote Russian interest, the anti-Russian factions were able to hijack public policy with dangerous consequences.

A simple truth: a fundamentally conservative power, Russia in fact threatens no one; it should be obvious that the threat to the preeminence of the Atlantic Alliance comes from another quarter altogether – China, a rising power an order of magnitude more populous and far more dynamic than Russia, and which now increasingly asserts her preeminent global role; it is merely a matter of time before a collision occurs between the rising and the declining superpowers. Rich in all the resources that China requires – and with a powerful nuclear arsenal and substantial diplomatic heft – Russia constitutes an ideal ally for Beijing.

Given the historical misunderstandings and mutual suspicion between the two giants as late as the early-1990s, an alliance between the Bear and the Dragon was very much an avoidable nightmare, and in decades to come, it will prove endlessly troublesome. When today’s Neocons sneer at Russia as a spent force, they are repeating the errors repeatedly committed with disastrous consequences by Western powers since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century – and for the West to have driven Russia into the arms of China was utter folly.

**Readers are warmly encouraged to forward T&B to any party who might be interested.  
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