

DON'T LET THE UKRAINE CRISIS SCREW YOUR MIND

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The two-month stand-off in Ukraine seems to have brought out all the demons. Whatever one may have read or heard, and however hard one may try to seize this crisis, everything associated with it has that immediate fatal touch of sand trickling between one's hands. Never mind what the talking heads say, an opinion arrived at one moment usually has to be revised the next. Partly this is the fault of the formidable disinformation, propaganda, or 'fog of war' that surrounds the most controversial aspects of the crisis. This is reflected in particular in the output of the Russian media, which reminds one of fiction, as featured in Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog*.

The other culprit is 'junk news', reflected in the low levels of analytical pertinence of large swathes of the Western media. Seldom has 'speech is silver, silence is gold' had a truer ring to it; and this shines through in public dissatisfaction with mainstream media

output <http://www.ndr.de/fernsehen/sendungen/zapp/Immer-auf-Putin-Breite-Kritik-an-Medien,ukraine419.html>. However, such a proposition is anathema to that powerful minority who feel that media bias is no cause for concern, as it comforts them in their belief that there is only one villain in this piece: Vladimir Putin. Anyone who dares raise his head above the parapet and claim a right to remain sceptical runs the risk of drawing fire and being branded Putin's 'useful idiot'

(http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/29/opinion/sierakowski-putins-useful-idiots.html?_r=0, a diversant bent on dividing a unified Western response or, comble du comble, a 'Putin-Versteher' (a term that emerged in Germany) <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2014-04/Kommentar-Debatte-Putin>. The atmosphere created by some pundits with media muscle is therefore beginning to look like a witch-hunt, with the only admissible framework being that of dividing the world into 'good' and 'evil'.

What is so bad about being a 'Putin-Versteher'? one might ask. One of the originalities of the Greek historian Herodotus was that he was not satisfied with the Persia-bashing of his fellow countrymen, but sought to understand the Persians. That's how we ended up with having the first history book in history, his *The Histories*. A semantic discussion of 'understand' will find that there are two connotations: one that is synonymous with 'to condone'; another with 'to rationalise, to make sense of'. Unpalatable as the world view and methods of a Vladimir Putin may be, the Hitler comparisons made by Hilary Clinton and German minister of the interior Wolfgang Schäuble will just not do. My argument here is that one can (and should) seek to understand this situation in a detached manner (*sine ira et studio*), and without relying on vilification.

Verstehen 1.0

The first act of understanding pertains to the fact that by annexing Crimea, and by stoking the fires in Eastern Ukraine, Russia is violating international law. If it is accurate that Putin kicked this plan into action after the ouster of the Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich, then Russia's neighbours do have reason to be afraid. True, the murky situation in Kiev before and after Yanukovich's forced departure, and especially the awarding of government positions to figures of the Ukrainian extreme right, justified Russian irritation, but there was nothing in the matter of Western and Ukrainian *faux pas* that licensed the *de facto* annexation of Crimea. On this point Western opinion is unanimous. Even the leader of the German leftist party Die Linke, Gregor Gysi, can acknowledge this. On the other hand, one must wonder whether Russia's violation of international law is the sole motive for the current outrage, considering that the legality of the Kosovo and Iraq precedents is shrouded in considerable 'mystery'. The fact that no international sanctions were imposed on the 'culprits', NATO, the US and the UK, then poses the problem of *Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi*: a first-rate power, such as the US (and her allies), has the capacity to impose things that a second rate power such as Russia does not have. It also says something about historical amnesia.

The other factor that lends itself to Verstehen is that Russia has little to gain from this conflict. The market fall-out has already been considerable, and this will only get worse if further sanctions are enacted. This brings us to the issue of strategic prize: is it worth ruining relations with the West for

Ukraine? At least Iraq is one of the top oil producers in the world. That's a stake one can understand; but the Black Sea region? Russia's move can only be understood in terms of identity and (hurt) pride. Crimea has a specific resonance in the Russian psyche and seeing Ukraine abscond into the Western camp is a cut too close to the bone. Besides, this is a cut that might, ultimately, threaten the stability of Putinism. Acting in a seemingly irrational manner reveals a regime that feels considerable strain, and that is choosing to marshal domestic legitimacy on the cheap, through territorial expansion. What one can also understand is that this situation will lead to a significant reshuffling of the cards, the final repercussions of which are unknown. Apart from the fact that NATO will have to rethink its current strategy, there is no sense of what the endgame might actually be, an idea that comes across in an article published by an IISS staffer <http://www.iiss.org/en/regions/ukraine/ukraine-and-the-new-normal-c687>. This is truly troubling. Although a straining of economic ties to breaking-point may be one of the outcomes if the current stand-off is allowed to fester and no compromise formula is found, nobody has even the faintest idea where one might start in reorienting trade flows between the EU and Russia. All this comes at a time when both fledgling sides of the equation – not to mention Ukraine - desperately need sustained growth and stability, and not further upheaval.

Verstehen 2.0

Moral absolutism is never an advisable thing. In *War and Peace* Tolstoy already showed that he had problems with absolutist certitudes, which he saw in evidence in the military planning of the Russian officer corps during the 1812 campaign, many of whom were of German origin:

Pfuehl was one of those hopelessly and immutably self-confident men, self-confident to the point of martyrdom as only Germans are, because only Germans are self-confident on the basis of an abstract notion- science, that is, the supposed knowledge of absolute truth. A Frenchman is self-assured because he regards himself personally, both in mind and body, as irresistibly attractive to men and women. An Englishman is self-assured, as being a citizen of the best-organized state in the world, and therefore as an Englishman always knows what he should do and knows that all he does as an Englishman is undoubtedly correct. An Italian is self-assured because he is excitable and easily forgets himself and other people. A Russian is self-assured just because he knows nothing [and] does not want to know anything, since he does not believe that anything can be known. The German's self-assurance is worst of all, stronger and more repulsive than any other, because he imagines that he knows the truth- science- which he himself has invented but which is for him the absolute truth.[1]<https://webmail.reims-ms.fr/owa/?ae=PreFormAction&a=Reply&t=IPM.Note&id=RgAAAACzGp4%2bSZy%2bSL0WKbyaSqw2BwCNxoNwPqB2TaxmGIP2bzW9AAAAddRuAAC8LMGgJbknTLeYC8VgF1OwAAAPCZmUAAAJ&pspid=1400576584954358275045#_ftn1>

Replace 'German' with 'Westerner', and you pretty much get a description of the attitude prevailing today. To mention but another historical example: at the end of the First World War Germany was forced, by virtue of article 231 of the Versailles treaty, to recognize her war guilt, a thesis that is now severely tested by a new bestselling book *The Sleepwalkers* (2013), by Cambridge historian Christopher Clark. Could we be making a similar mistake today?

Current Western self-assurance (and self-righteousness) is based on a number of false assumptions. On the one hand, there are the advocates of continuity, those who have been warning the world about Putin ever since his accession to power, and who are having a field day right now. It is by no means uncontested that there should be a red thread going all the way back to 2000. Although there is now some indication that Russian contingency planning for an unfavourable turn in Ukraine's position towards Russia may have started last summer <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/18/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-insight-idUSBREA4H02520140518>, this is not equivalent to arguing a deterministic case. Let us not forget the potential impact of Western unilateralism on a number of important issues of vital interest to Russia. The current situation is also the result of the detritus left by the neo-con agenda

which dominated US and global politics in the era of Bush junior. Too bad for Obama that he has to clear up the mess, on top of dealing with the worst financial and economic crisis in living memory.

The other false assumption, peddled by liberals and hardcore atlanticists, is that Geopolitics was dead (but has returned) <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/ukraine-krise-die-geopolitik-ist-zurueck-und-mit-ih-1.1948718>; or that today it is only practiced by retrogrades, Russians or Putin-Verstehers. Associated with this false assumption is the contention that Realpolitik is dead (or should be dead), and that 'national interest' is a dirty word. One will disagree with the way in which Russia upholds her national interest, through deception, blackmail, bullying, propaganda and other dubious means, and one may also doubt whether her strongman is always in touch with reality, but Russian susceptibilities should have been taken on board. The Ukrainian EU Association agreement does go beyond economic cooperation and includes a small military and security dimension (s. Title II, article 10, http://eeas.europa.eu/ukraine/pdf/3_ua_title_ii_pol_dialogue_reform_pol_assoc_coop_convergence_in_fsp_en.pdf). To sweep this political and strategic minefield, it would have been necessary to address Russian concerns in some form, but there is little indication that any such thing was seriously attempted. This is a good indicator of the dismal state of political relations between the EU and Russian, which is characterized by mutual suspicion and the most superficial interest in a 'common European home'. It confirms what has been going on for years now. Rather than seeking new forms of engagement, however, the consequence drawn by Europeans has been to reinforce unilateralism, of the sort as one can now see in evidence in the process of Ukrainian EU association. Anyone but the most deluded liberal should have known that such meddling in Russia's traditional backyard, without making some kind of overture to Russia, would be like driving straight into a brick wall. As Wolfgang Ischinger, the chairman of the Munich Security Conference said in a German TV talk show, the EU decision-makers made a mistake by treating Ukrainian EU association in the same vein as Icelandic EU association, as a purely technical question <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/tv-kritik/tv-kritik-guenther-jauch-ein-grundkurs-krim-fuer-guenther-jauch-12828903.html>. This was a reckless oversight considering the history and the geopolitically charged nature of the European 'bloodlands' (T. Snyder). It shows the kind of damage that an absence of historical sensitivity, a hearty disdain of geopolitical realities, plus foreign policy amateurism, can do. Perhaps there is something in the reproach of former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who formulated that the EU is struck by delusions of grandeur <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-krise-helmut-schmidt-wirft-eu-groessenwahn-vor-a-969773.html>.

Acknowledging European blind spots should not be construed as an attempt to exonerate Russia, far from it. Our best bet of altering Russian behaviour lies not in lecturing or punishing Russia, but in cultivating a flexible approach, one that appropriately addresses our best European interests and commands respect. We need to open up new opportunities for dialogue with Russia, but also, at the same time, arrive at a more realistic assessment of a potential Russian threat. In regard to this it would be difficult to argue that the EU always gets her policy mix, and her priorities, right. While building closer EU ties to countries in the Eastern Partnership is something that must, necessarily, also involve Russia, minimizing our energy independence on Russia is something that involves only us.

Verstehen 3.0

But let's dig even deeper, what else does this crisis tell us? What have clashed here are two very basic orientations, or principles. On the one hand, there is the legitimate desire of many people living in the post-Soviet space (as in other parts of the globe) to rid themselves of corruption and cronyism, and become 'normal' countries. This applies to Ukraine, but also to Moldova and Georgia. This desire is what underpinned the Euro-Maidan movement, and not, as the Russian establishment has been blazing around hysterically, to introduce fascism through the backdoor. The topos of Ukrainian liberty merged with the rise of democracy promotion and the recent upsurge of global protest movements. The job that hadn't been finished in 1989 would be finished now.

The problem with the new secular religion of freedom is that it has one major flaw: it does not care for looking on a map, or at tenacious factors on the ground. One does not have to be a friend of the

dictatorships or semi-dictatorships that emerged from the post-Soviet rubble to understand that the pursuit of freedom might one day meet its limits. And this day seems to have come. The real question in this situation is not how we should voice our condemnation of the purportedly villainous nature of Putin's Russia, but what we should do in the face of our most profound dilemma: to which point will we push the agenda of democracy? To the point of causing civil wars?

Historian Robert Conquest once used the term 'revolutionary romanticism' to describe the attraction of the myth of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. I would venture to say that we might be suffering from a similar affliction today. The 'Whig' narrative of where history is supposed to be taking us is particularly strong in the two archetypical republics of the Western world, the United States and France. Discourse there is monopolised by the positive (romantic) aspects of Revolution, while anything even resembling a counter-project invites raised eyebrows. Revolutionary romanticism is one of the reasons why the French are having such a hard time fitting the legacy of the two Napoleons into the straightjacket of their official historical memory; and why most Americans find it impossible to fathom that they themselves have become the custodians of an informal empire, based on a certain measure of coercion as well as lack of freedom and choice in some contexts.

The current primacy of revolutionary romanticism in Western political doctrine needs to be rethought; for a bad peace may be preferable in many instances to a good war, especially a good civil war. What is also absent from most treatments of the Ukrainian affair is the significant soft power dimension. The fallout of the financial and economic crisis has brought things to a boil. Movements of contestation are now a common occurrence across the globe. While the Western democratic process can deal with protest, the emergence of similar forces is a more dangerous thing in illiberal regimes, where they can quickly lead to the toppling or decapitation of an entire order, as witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The Russian government (but also the Chinese) have reason to fear such bushfires and are therefore very proactive in extinguishing or diminishing any potential sources of 'contamination'. They do this, among other things, through systematic soft-soaping about the benefits of their own systems of development, the depravity or inefficiency of the crisis-ridden West, as well as the uniqueness of their culture and values. This is designed to hide the fact that the virtual kleptocracies of Russia and China are actually quite unstable: capital flight from Russia is colossal and the economic model in urgent need of reform, something Putin is unable to deliver; China is marred by high level corruption, which it needs to reconcile with a necessity to continue to lift millions out of poverty, enlarge the Chinese middle class and continue to satisfy system stakeholders.

One needs to resist the temptation of casting this contest in terms of moral condemnation. The current contest is not necessarily over territories, but over the hearts, minds and pockets of people. It's also a form of system maintenance: guaranteeing the viability of one's political, social and economic order. The fluidity and asymmetric warfare this entails is described in one of the most poignant articles written on the Ukraine crisis, by Mark Galleotti <http://readrussia.com/2014/04/11/the-new-great-gamers-covert-civilian-and-clueless-soldiers-of-the-modern-battlespace/>. Galleotti suggest that we ditch the New Cold War paradigm, with its imagined Manichean contest, and replace this by the new Great Game, in analogy to a metaphor that was used to describe Russian-British competition for influence in Central Asia during the 19th century. What makes this new Great Game particularly piquant is that its previous version sported two antagonists; while this one has three: Russia, the Western alliance and China. The latter's role in this 'game' is one area where one can say that the West is struck with particular blindness. The Communist regime in China is in a similar legitimacy trap as Putinism in Russia, and it can only escape this through expansion in every imaginable direction.

[1]<https://webmail.reims-ms.fr/owa/?ae=PreFormAction&a=Reply&t=IPM.Note&id=RgAAAACzGp4%2bSZy%2bSL0WKbyaSqw2BwCNxoNwPqB2TaxmGIP2bzW9AAAAddRuAAC8LMGgJbknTLeYC8VgF1OwAAAPCZmUAAAJ&pspid=1400576584954_358275045#_ftnref1> http://www.planetpdf.com/planetpdf/pdfs/free_ebooks/War_and_Peace_NT.pdf