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## The Ukrainian crisis and the challenges of integration

Posted on **April 15, 2014** by **tkelly**

A guest blog by **Dejan Stjepanović** of the University of Edinburgh on the Ukraine crisis.

The ongoing Ukrainian crisis raises a number of serious questions about the future of political relations in Europe. Until now, the primary driver of regional integration in post-socialist Europe was the European Union. The return of Russia onto the stage, and its not shying away from using its military power, caught some observers by surprise. Behind the struggle for geopolitical dominance lies a deeper problem which arises from the pervasive influence of the essentialist understanding of nation, state, sovereignty and borders.



As the crisis evolved, especially following the intervention of (pro) Russian troops in Crimea, a number of reporters and analysts attempted to provide a deeper insight into the issue behind the crisis. In the early days of the conflict, a common feature

was the reference to the etymology of the country's name – Ukraine. For anyone speaking a Slavic language the meaning is quite clear and denotes a borderland (cf. Habsburg **Military Frontier** – *Vojna Krajina*). However, whilst this is linguistically accurate, the analysts almost in unison went on to claim that Ukraine represented a historic border between Russia and Europe (sic!).

Post factum interpretations did not stop there. Another one was a conscious forgetting, with one notable **exception**, that the Crimean case was in many ways a success story of post-socialist disintegration and for over twenty years functioned as a multi-ethnic autonomy.

Most importantly, ethnicity reigned as the key issue of analyses which often relapsed into using the ancient hatreds argument. Tartars were singled out as the rightful proprietors of the Crimean peninsula, neglecting myriad other groups that historically inhabited the region. A few weeks ago, at a round table on the Ukrainian crisis I attended, one of the presenters tried to dismiss the legitimacy of the independence referendum in Crimea held on 16 March. Instead of mentioning procedural issues such as the lack of dialogue with the central state or the brevity of the entire process (the referendum was held within 5 days from being announced!), which seriously question

its legitimacy, it was argued that since there is no such thing as the Crimeans (probably referring to some ethnonational group), there is no one to exercise the right to self-determination. Yet again, the only contenders are the ethnic groups. Are multi-ethnic polities an aberration for the analyst? The fact that communities inhabiting especially border regions can articulate and perform a multiplicity of overlapping and often conflicting identities is swept aside.

Why is this the case? It has been often argued in the literature that the deserving candidates for the creation of a distinct polity independent or devolved are ethnic groups. But, at the core of the problem in Crimea or for that matter in eastern and parts of southern Ukraine is not necessarily ethnicity (it can become so if persistently overemphasised). Over the last few months we have seen numerous ethnic and linguistic maps of Ukraine accompanied by statistical data thrown at us, to make clear where the fault lines of Ukrainian society and the current crisis lie. However, at stake are the opposing views of (supra-state) regional integration, whether to move closer to the EU or Russia. Once again, the citizens of Ukraine are confronted with a binary opposition. But should it be this way?

In a recent [statement](#) the Austrian foreign minister argued that as a solution to the predicament, a common (economic) space between Lisbon and Vladivostok should be created. Whilst this might at first seem a naive suggestion, it might help towards a viable solution. One thing is certain: a unitary nation-state with a single regional integration future is not a feasible option and will only serve to enhance the existing cleavages. Overall, the challenge of interpreting of the crisis is conditioned by the inability to go beyond the conventional frames of analysis. As unorthodox as it might sound, one should revisit the old concept of a borderland, where exclusive sovereignty is reined in and multiple loyalties thrive.

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