

Alina Nychyk

Ukraine Vis-à-Vis Russia and the EU

Misperceptions of Foreign Challenges in Times of War, 2014–2015

With a foreword by Paul D'Anieri

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Foreword by *Paul D'Anieri*

When analysts discuss the events following the Russian assault on Ukraine in 2022, the careful ones often refer to “Russia’s full-scale invasion,” recognizing that Russia had first invaded Ukraine in 2014, and that war had not ceased since then, though it was much less intense between 2015 and 2022. This chronology creates puzzles for those who study the war and would seek to explain it. If the massive escalation that took place in 2022 was an extension of the war that began in 2014, what is the relationship between the events? Do they constitute a single war, two distinct wars, or something in between? What is the relationship between explaining what happened in 2014 and explaining what happened in 2022? Complicating matters further is the fact that in 2014, Russia effectively made two distinct decisions to invade Ukraine, first using special forces to seize Crimea, then fomenting rebellion in Donbas before invading with regular army forces when its proxies were on the verge of defeat.

While the scale, brutality and global implications of the 2022 escalation have naturally drawn sustained attention from media around the world and from scholars who previously paid very little attention to Ukraine, the 2014 invasions faded from front pages relatively quickly. However, understanding why Russia invaded in 2014, and invaded not only Crimea but also Donbas (and tried to set conditions for seizing a much larger swath of eastern and southern Ukraine) is essential if we want to understand why Russia saw the need to escalate in 2022. Similarly, the extent of Russian aggression in 2022 offers evidence relevant to claims about Russia’s goals and motives in 2014.

While much focus is on Russia’s decisions, it is equally important to understand how Ukraine responded to Russia’s invasions. One of the major victories of Russian propaganda, avidly abetted by many western scholars and commentators, is the prevailing discussion of the war as essentially between Russia and the West (or particularly the United States). While western support has been crucial in helping Ukraine resist Russia, the notion

of Ukraine as a western proxy effectively deprives Ukraine of its agency and distorts the historical record. In 2014 Ukraine's resistance was initially weak enough to allow Russia to seize Crimea and to capture important swaths of Donbas, but then recovered to force a major adjustment of Russia's aspirations and tactics. In 2022, when the US was urging President Zelenskyy to flee, the Ukrainian government's decision to remain and fight, and the tenacity with which Ukraine's army and society resisted, again completely changed the nature of the conflict. Treating the war as one between Russia and the West is not, of course an analytically neutral move. In addition to being a distortion of what happened it feeds the belief that Ukraine is merely an object of others' actions, rather than a subject in its own right. This is exactly what the Russian government (and some in the West) have long contended.

Alina Nychyk's book goes a long way to correcting that misimpression in the case of the crucial months in 2014 following the culmination of the "Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv." As Viktor Yanukovych fled Kyiv, Russian special forces began the takeover of Crimea. The exact timing of the decisions by Yanukovych to flee Ukraine and by Putin to seize Crimea remains opaque. The assumption is that the first caused the second, and Nychyk's chronology fits with this view, but we still do not know exactly when Putin ordered the seizure of Crimea.

Nychyk addresses the equally important question of how and why the new Ukrainian government responded, first to the invasion in Crimea, and then to the nascent rebellions across eastern and southern Ukraine. This analysis rightly puts Ukraine at the center of the picture, for while Russia obviously took the initiative in starting the war, Ukraine had a range of options in responding. The choices it made help explain why the two sides arrived at the Minsk protocol in September 2014 and at the revision of that agreement, "Minsk 2," in February 2015.

Ukraine's response to the invasions of Crimea and Donbas represents two contradictory phenomena – the near collapse of the Ukrainian state versus the ability of the state and society to quickly reconstitute a fighting force that thwarted Russia's ambitions

both in Donbas and across “Novorossiia.” While the Ukrainian parliament quickly replaced the departed Viktor Yanukovich with Oleksandr Turchynov, much of the top level of the government fled. Many others in key positions, especially in Crimea, joined Russia. After Turchynov appointed Denis Berezovsky the new head of the Black Sea Fleet on March 1, Berezovsky defected the next day, and a few weeks later was named deputy commander of the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

As a result, the levers which Ukrainian leaders could pull in these crucial first days were limited. The new Ukrainian leaders faced the immense power of the Russian military just as their own military command and state apparatus had crumbled. This appears to have deterred Ukraine from challenging militarily the annexation of Crimea. Not only did Ukraine appear militarily incapable of retaking Crimea, but there was fear that if Ukraine tried to do so, Russia would respond by invading eastern Ukraine. The memory of Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, in which Georgia’s response to provocations by Russian proxies was used to justify a large-scale Russian invasion and occupation, deterred Ukraine from challenging the annexation of Crimea. Western governments urged Ukrainian leaders not to “overreact”. The fact that responding to an invasion was seen as justifying further invasion demonstrates the extent to which Russia had won the information war before the actual war even began. As it turned out, of course, Russia invaded eastern Ukraine anyhow.

Despite these early problems, Ukraine rallied and checked Russian moves in eastern and southern Ukraine. Government forces were deployed to Donetsk and Luhansk to challenge the building occupations and secessionist movements. Equally important, non-governmental actors filled gaps created by state weakness, deploying paramilitaries to help combat separatism. The far-right political orientations of some of these “volunteer battalions” fed Russian propaganda about Ukrainian fascism, and these groups were gradually integrated into the Ukrainian armed forces. Moreover, government and business elites in several cities, including Mariupol and Kharkiv, worked to foil efforts by pro-Russian forces to take over those cities. In Odesa, pro-Russian

forces were also defeated by local Ukrainians, but dozens of people, mostly pro-Russian activists, died in the conflict.

Thus, while Russia took the initiative in driving conflict in Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022, and while the West's policies created both opportunities and costs for Ukraine, the Ukrainians themselves played a crucial and neglected role in the story. Literature in international conflict reminds us that war begins and continues only if two sides are willing to fight. Ukraine steadfastly resisted Russian entreaties after 1991, whether those entreaties were backed by positive inducements or by threats. In 2014, Ukraine decided not to fight for Crimea, but to fight for Donbas. While much research has focused on explaining Russian choices, not enough has focused on exploring how Ukrainians saw the problems, how they evaluated and debated the possible responses, and how successfully they executed their decisions. This book provides much-needed analysis of these questions.

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