

The Psychological Logic of Protracted Conflict in Ukraine

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Since the Euromaidan protests began in November 2013, the Ukraine conflict has occurred on several levels. There is a military conflict between a state, a rebel movement, and another state. There is mass-level political and material support of a pro-European government and a pro-Russian rebellion. And there has been an information war in which all parties have worked to define the conflict on their terms. This last dimension is the subject of this memo. It analyzes how psychological tendencies to view the world in self-serving ways, coupled with political opportunism, have contributed to escalation of the crisis and complicated its resolution. The resulting polarization in attitudes, while not the only factor, has made resolution of the current conflict and long-term reconciliation within Ukraine more difficult.

Fear and Loathing in Kyiv

After November 2013, several narratives took shape to define the Ukraine crisis. At the risk of oversimplifying, pro-European Ukrainians understood the situation as follows: The Euromaidan was a pure expression of the people's will to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and anchor it in the zone of European democracies. President Viktor Yanukovich ceded his right to rule when he ordered troops to kill unarmed protesters. The government that formed after his ouster was therefore legitimate.

Opponents of the Euromaidan argued that the protests involved a non-representative minority. They called the overthrow of Yanukovich a coup, which countered popular will as expressed through the 2010 democratic presidential election. Russia and its sympathizers further alleged U.S. backing of the Euromaidan and called its supporters fascists.

It is not surprising that subsequent events were viewed by the conflicting parties in ways consistent with these foundational assumptions. Psychologists have noted the tendency for people to reject new information that conflicts with preexisting views and

accept only facts that confirm them, a mechanism called confirmation bias.¹ Unaware of their biases, people will perceive new events and interpret ambiguous information in ways that reaffirm their beliefs, and then act accordingly.

Although this process takes place within the minds of individuals, biased information can be disseminated on a massive scale when organizations become involved in propagating it. Both states and insurgent groups have an interest in producing in-group solidarity and out-group hostility, and the wide reach of social media has lowered the cost of spreading propaganda.

In the Ukraine crisis, political organizations on both sides disseminated self-serving messages, but their involvement took different forms. On the pro-Ukraine side, biased claims came from the bottom up, originating among Euromaidan activists before being taken up by the interim government whose legitimacy derived from the revolution. They were reinforced by the United States and sympathetic members of the European Union, whose policies sought to safeguard the independence of Ukraine and stop Russia from extending its influence in Europe. In Russia, the process was mostly top-down, coming from the state through the mass media, echoed by rebel spokesmen, and broadcast (or tweeted) to audiences in Russia and eastern Ukraine, who were receptive to the message or lacked the wherewithal to question it.

To see how narratives fuel, and thrive on, disputed incidents amid uncertainty, take the case of a flyer posted in Donetsk that announced that Jews would have to register with the new authorities and pay 50 dollars. Immediately both sides exploited this incident, consistent with their psychological biases and group interests. On the Ukrainian side, it was taken as evidence that the rebels controlling Donetsk were not only thugs but anti-Semites, a message that was plausible to people who already believed the worst about the rebels and useful to persuade Western governments to support their cause. The incident put the pro-Russians on the defensive. They portrayed the notice as an underhanded hoax—a “provocation” by their adversaries to discredit them, also with nefarious intentions.² That it turned out to be a hoax did not dampen the propaganda value of the incident on both sides.

A second episode highlighted how even massive loss of life can be subsumed by conflicting narratives: the May 2 clashes between pro-government and pro-Russian activists in Odessa that culminated in the deaths of 42 pro-Russians. The pro-Russians insinuated that the burning of the Profsoyuz building where activists had taken shelter was deliberate and blamed extremists from the Right Sector, whose role in Euromaidan

¹ Raymond S. Nickerson, “Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises.” *Review of General Psychology* 2, 1998: 175–220.

² <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117415/relax-ukraine-not-ordering-its-jews-register>

and its aftermath was exaggerated by the Russian media.³ The pro-Ukrainians emphasized that a march of its own supporters had been attacked by pro-Russian forces earlier that day, depicting subsequent actions as self-defense, and arguing that the fires were started accidentally – or, perhaps, by rebels themselves.⁴

Conflicting Narratives and Conflict

What both sides share, as illustrated by these cases, is a set of self-serving assumptions premised on the belief that their cause is just. It follows that the other side is misguided and wrong. So far, so typical. The post-Soviet context adds two wrinkles about the other side's motivations and means. First, it acts exclusively as the proxy of an external power: the United States or Russia. Second, it is prone to taking advantage of the fog of war by acting underhandedly in violation of established norms. To elaborate, I describe three effects, both intentional and inadvertent, that result from the partisan manipulation of information.

First, it helps mobilize forces against a constructed monolithic enemy, portrayed as a union of domestic opponents and their external backers⁵: Russia and its minions in the East, or the United States and its puppet regime in Kyiv. Seeing the hand of great powers behind every challenge turns run-of-the-mill detractors into insidious threats. Demands that might appear reasonable in ordinary circumstances are perceived as the chicanery of a foreign interest. For example, pro-Ukrainian desires for a less corrupt government were interpreted in eastern Ukraine and Russia as a smokescreen for the imposition of a pro-Western foreign policy. Eastern demands for more cultural autonomy are viewed by many in western Ukraine with suspicion, as a slippery slope toward federalization and increased Russian influence. Both framings lead people to portray their fellow citizens as unpatriotic, possibly even treasonous, insofar as they are acting at the behest of a foreign country.

Second, the purposeful manipulation of information enables and excuses measures outside the bounds of normal politics, including violence. The cognitive biases at work during a conflict remove any doubt that setbacks to one's side whose causes are unknown or unproven should be blamed on the adversary. If the adversary is believed to resort to devious and illegitimate tactics such as spying, spreading misinformation, or carrying out "provocations," then why not respond in kind? The perception that the other side has violated norms enables one to do the same, lest it cede the initiative to the transgressing party.

³ http://voiceofrussia.com/2014_05_05/Fascists-burning-people-alive-in-Odessa-nazism-on-the-rise-in-Europe-4288/

⁴ <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/05/odessas-fire-examined>

⁵ This is also a variant of attribution bias whereby observers overestimate the unity of the adversary.

Propaganda also leads participants to prioritize advocating for their side at the expense of values they claim to uphold. Thus, the United States endorsed the interim government that came to power under constitutionally dubious procedures after Yanukovich fled and gave its “full support” to the Ukrainian government and its “anti-terrorist operation (ATO),” notwithstanding its heavy-handed methods and civilian casualties.⁶ The lack of concern by the United States about the deaths in Odessa—the single most violent incident to that point—reinforced beliefs that the United States was guilty of double standards.⁷ It goes without saying that the pro-Russian side rationalizes torture, kidnapping, and murder by invoking a greater cause, whether it be anti-fascism or Russian nationalism. Both sides have patronized, and even armed, volunteer militias that are assumed to be less constrained in their actions than uniformed armies.

Third, the information war and hardening of attitudes make negotiations politically unpalatable. The combination of seeing one’s cause as just and the adversary as a model of iniquity, played out over many rounds, creates audience costs for leaders who will be accused of appeasement if they offer concessions. This has been written about extensively in the case of Russia, where Vladimir Putin’s regime has used state-controlled media to promote a coherent narrative demonizing the Ukrainian government, thus limiting his freedom of maneuver. Yet the Ukrainian government, cheered on by its supporters, pursued military victory and put negotiations on the backburner. It could be argued that this approach had a strategic logic. However, the new government was also acting on short-term political calculations, believing that it might lose support among its base if it negotiated in earnest. As of early September 2014, there is renewed talk of negotiations following a Russian advance and a ceasefire, but even if Putin is prepared to seek a settlement, Poroshenko is hamstrung by his government’s previous rhetoric. Concessions that might allow Putin to save face would risk a backlash from Ukrainian radicals. Any acquiescence to the demands of residents of the Donbas would be perceived as benefitting their malevolent benefactors first and foremost.

Counterproductive Counterinsurgency

Whether an agreement is reached or Russia continues to destabilize the Donbas, the above dynamics complicate the prospects for Ukrainian state-building. Mao Tse-tung famously likened guerrillas to fish, who “swim” in a sea of sympathetic people and defy central authority. It follows that the government must make the sea inhospitable for the fish by outdoing the guerrillas in providing protection and security. People will then buy into the system and support the government against its rivals, both internal (insurgents) and external (their foreign backers). This approach rests on the fact that

⁶ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/24/ukraine-unguided-rockets-killing-civilians>;
<http://thehill.com/policy/international/207259-ukraines-new-leader-has-full-us-support>;
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/23/world/europe/biden-ukraine.html>

⁷ www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2014/may/225674.htm

state power, to be effective, requires the consent of society. When people believe the government is legitimate, they comply with its authority, for example, by following laws and paying taxes.⁸

The ATO made state-building more difficult. By describing the rebels as “terrorists, snipers, and marauders,”⁹ Poroshenko boosted support for military action to crush the insurgency only by reaffirming his supporters’ malevolent perceptions of residents of the east. By not distinguishing hard-core fighters from alienated or ambivalent citizens, this rhetoric devalued the interests of pro-Russian but non-violent residents. Furthermore, indiscriminate counterinsurgent attacks in cities alienated people and weakened the state’s legitimacy.¹⁰ Polls in July showed that 37 percent of residents of the Donbas support secession, a higher percentage than in April.¹¹ Even if Ukraine succeeds in driving out the rebels and ending Russia’s military involvement, it will still leave behind a divided country.

The most surefire way to undercut Russia’s influence, in both the short and long run, is to turn the local population against it. An effective state-building package would include a good faith proposal for political and cultural decentralization to the Donbas and, ideally, redistribution of state resources to benefit the most alienated citizens.¹² Yet implementation would face major obstacles. The legislative elections in October 2014 will likely usher in a more pro-Western and nationalist cohort, especially if voting is impeded in the Donbas. This will move the Ukrainian parliament closer to Poroshenko ideologically but it may also limit his flexibility to reach out the east. Policies that can be construed to benefit rebels or their supporters will be a hard sell among pro-Ukrainians, lest it appear they are succumbing to extortion. The result will be ongoing conflict and an increasingly riven society. Perversely, when politicians understand their constituents’ cognitive biases, they purposely poison the well to gain short-term advantages. Unfortunately, Ukrainian politicians failed to recognize that when they played this game, they played right into Putin’s hands.

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⁸ Margaret Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁹ <http://www.dw.de/ukraine-relaunches-anti-terrorism-operation-against-separatists/a-17748517>

¹⁰ “Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies,” Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 2 June 2014, pp. 1-8, 1-9, <http://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf>

¹¹ http://www.ratinggroup.com.ua/upload/files/RG_East_072014.pdf, p. 17. For April, see <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2014%20April%205%20IRI%20Public%20Opinion%20Survey%20of%20Ukraine%2C%20March%2014-26%2C%202014.pdf>

¹² It was not revealed publicly whether these or other reforms were discussed at international forums that also involved the Russian government.