

Crisis in Ukraine: IA Forum Interview with Dr. Yuri V. Urbanovich, University of Virginia

International Affairs Forum: To begin with, would you say the Crimea crisis is ushering a new wave of strained U.S.-Russia relations not seen since the Cold War?

Dr. Yuri V. Urbanovich: At first sight, the reaction is very negative with all these sanctions and what we hear on television and what we read in newspapers. At the same time, I must recognize that there is quite a significant group of influential political thinkers in the United States, among those Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Ambassador Jack Matlock (the last U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union) and some others, who published balanced articles and made very thoughtful and constructive statements. It helps to better understand all the complexities and the nuances of the situation. I agree with Ambassador Matlock's opinion expressed in one of his recent articles that "nothing weakens a nation more than holding territory whose residents prefer to belong to another country."

Crimea being part of Ukraine, as it has developed after the breakup of the Soviet Union, was seen in Russia as an act of historic injustice, because it was Russia's territory beginning from the end of the 18th century. By the way, not many people know that the founder of the American Navy, John Paul Jones, who was also Rear Admiral of the Russian Navy, played a certain role in strengthening Russia's position on the Black Sea due to his participation in Russia's war against the Ottoman Empire in 1788. The Crimean Peninsula, before it came under Russian control, was under the protectorate of the Ottoman Empire. The people who lived in the Crimean Peninsula were the Crimean Tatars, ethnically and religiously very close to the Turks. And when the Russian Empire was expanding to the South, several territories were incorporated into the Russian Empire, including the Crimean Peninsula, which became part of an area that was known in the Russian Empire as *Novorossiya*, which means new Russia. Thus, from 1783 until 1954, Crimea was a province of the Russian Empire and later an autonomous territorial formation of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) within the USSR.

Then, it was in 1954, in celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Russian-Ukrainian union (the Pereyaslav Treaty), Nikita Khrushchev, the then Soviet leader who, by the way, was originally from Ukraine, made the decision to transfer the Crimean Peninsula under the jurisdiction of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine. However, Sevastopol, which was (and still is) the naval base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, remained with a distinct status. It was administered directly by the central authorities within the Soviet Union, because of its strategic significance. Why Nikita Khrushchev made the decision to transfer the Crimean Peninsula under the jurisdiction of Ukraine remains a debatable question. Khrushchev came to power after Stalin's death. There was a theory that in making such a generous gift to Ukraine, he hoped that the Communist party authorities in Ukraine would take it into account and thus he would gain more political support in Ukraine which was important for him at that time. Again, I repeat, it's difficult to say for sure. My colleagues and I spoke with his son when he visited the University of Virginia, Sergei Khrushchev. We asked him directly what motivated his father to transfer the Crimean Peninsula. He argued that it was for purely economic reasons. But the fact is that the transfer was done without any consultations with the people who lived in Crimea or with the people in the Russian

Federation. There were also formal violations with the approval of this decision by the Russian Parliament (Supreme Soviet). However, nobody cared at that time. Of course, Khrushchev couldn't imagine in his worst nightmares that one day Ukraine would become an independent state and that Crimea would be lost for Russia.

The problem with Crimea is that it is not only about the Black Sea fleet base in Sevastopol. In Russian history, Crimea has always held a significant place. In 1853-1856, there was a war which Russia lost, the Crimean War with the Ottoman Empire, during which the Ottoman Empire was supported by Great Britain and France. However, a heroic defense of Sevastopol gave rise to a swelling national pride which was reflected in Leo Tolstoy's "Sevastopol Sketches." In World War II, a brave resistance of Sevastopol lasted two hundred and fifty days and remains imprinted in the Russian imagination.

Russian czars had their summer palaces in Crimea. Many outstanding Russian writers, poets, composers, artists spent their summer vacations in Crimea. Anton Chekhov wrote "The Cherry Orchard" in Yalta where he lived on a permanent basis because of his health problems. Important political meetings took place in Yalta during WWII in February 1945, where "The Big Troika" - Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin - made their decisions about post-war Europe.

After the breakup of the USSR, the Crimean Republic proclaimed self-government (May 1992). However, in March 1995, the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament of Ukraine) abolished the May 1992 Constitution and the post of the President of Crimea. Let's not forget that almost 60% of the Crimean population consists of ethnic Russians. Many among those who are ethnic Ukrainians still consider the Russian language as their mother tongue. The third significant ethnic group in the Crimea is the Crimean Tatars, who were deported by the Stalinist regime in 1944. The official reason why they were deported [under Stalin] was their alleged collaboration with the enemy during WWII. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, many of them repatriated back, and as of today, there are almost 300,000 ethnic Tatars in Crimea, which makes approximately 12% of the population.

IA-Forum: So how valid do you think the referendum was given that 12% of population (the Crimean Tatars) refused to participate?

Dr. Urbanovich: About 40% of the Crimean Tatars took part in the referendum. Also, do not forget that certain preliminary work was done among the Crimean Tatars by the representatives of Tatarstan (Republic of Tatarstan of the Russian Federation). Rustam Minnikhanov, the leader of Tatarstan visited Crimea and met with leaders of the Crimean Tatars. It is my guess that President Putin asked him to visit Crimea. Also, Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of Chechnya, another Muslim republic of the Russian Federation, visited Crimea and had meetings with leaders of the Tartar community to make them more willing to support Crimea's integration within the Russian Federation. And apparently it worked to a certain extent. Plus, Putin, before the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, emphasized that there will be an official political rehabilitation of the Crimean Tatars. He also emphasized that there will be three state languages in the Republic of Crimea: Russian, Ukrainian, and the Crimean Tatar, which is very important for them. And, of course, respect for their religion, and their traditions and their

representation in different institutions of political power in the Republic of Crimea. If I'm not mistaken, the decision was made by the Crimean legislature to elevate their representation to 20%, which is much higher than their percentage within Crimea. Almost 97% of Crimean residents voted for reunification with Russia.

IA-Forum: Does the referendum violate international law at all?

Dr. Urbanovich: First of all, it violated the national law of Ukraine. It also violated international law since, in 1994, Ukraine surrendered the nuclear weapons located on its territory to Russia in exchange for Russian, American and British affirmation (the Budapest Memorandum) of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity (which included Crimea). But frankly, it violated national law to the same degree as it was violated in the Republic of Serbia by recognizing the independence of Kosovo. There has been an eternal contradiction between the principle of people's right to self-determination and national constitutions and national law. Looking further back in history, Turkey undertook similar actions toward Northern Cyprus in 1974, eventually recognizing its independence in 1983. As of today, Turkey remains the only country in the world to recognize the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Although, I must recognize that each of these historical analogies differs from one another. However, if we talk about a people's right to self-determination, international law does not prohibit self-determination. Moscow also claims that it did not violate international law because the current government in Kiev came to power in a coup and, due to its ultranationalist policies, it in essence, "blew up" Ukrainian unity and "pushed" Crimea away.

The question is what motivated Russia to act so aggressively under the circumstances taking into account all of the potential risks? Of course, the precedent created by Crimea can backfire. However, in my opinion, the West did not realize that to Russia, the Ukraine issue is a red line. Russia's main concern is that Ukraine, one day, might become a NATO member. And frankly speaking, the West didn't hide it. Under the Bush administration, the U.S. Congress was driving Ukraine toward NATO quite actively. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, it was promised to Ukraine and Georgia that one day they would be members of NATO. For Russia, it would completely change the geopolitical situation at its borders. Moreover, Russian leaders immediately recalled that when Gorbachev agreed to the unification of Germany, the West (meaning James Baker) promised Gorbachev that after unification of Germany, NATO would not expand one inch eastward. Then, when under the Clinton Administration NATO expanded to the east, in Russia, it was perceived as a broken promise of the West involving its national security. Naturally, it triggered Russian anxiety that NATO is steadily moving to Russia's borders and that, one day, even Ukraine might become a NATO member and NATO battleships would be stationed in Sevastopol and NATO missiles would be deployed on the Ukrainian-Russian border. Frankly, I believe that behind all Russia's motivations, this is obviously the most important.

IA-Forum: Is there a possibility that the rest of Ukraine will become a part of the EU as retaliation for Russia annexing Crimea?

Dr. Urbanovich: No, I don't think so. At least not in the observable future if you mean a full membership. But there will be an association with the EU, which will be gradually expanding.

The problem with Ukraine is that it is a very complex entity. Going back to history, in its contemporary borders Ukraine was established with the active participation of three Soviet leaders: by Lenin, when he recognized the independence of Ukraine and its borders of 1919 with the capital city in Kharkov. From 1919 until 1934, the capital city was Kharkov, which is predominantly a Russian speaking city. Then, in 1939, according to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between the Soviet Union and Germany, Stalin annexed eastern Poland where Galicia was located and incorporated it into the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine. And in 1954, it was Khrushchev who transferred the Crimean Peninsula under Ukraine's jurisdiction. So you have three parts, which are not very compatible because western Ukraine for centuries was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, then the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and then part of Poland. They see their history in a different way, they have different heroes, they celebrate different holidays, they remain very divided over WWII legacy. In eastern Ukraine and Crimea, a great majority of people speak Russian. In terms of religion, western Ukraine is predominantly Greek Catholic (Uniate Church) and also Roman Catholic, whereas eastern Ukraine is Orthodox Christian. So you have de facto two identities, two civilizations, if you wish, under one roof.

IA-Forum: What happens to the rest of eastern Ukraine since Crimea was annexed by Russia? Will they want to become a part of Russia as well?

Dr. Urbanovich: I do not think that Russia can afford that, unless something terrible happens like war or a serious conflict. God forbid! What Russia would appreciate and would support, is if Ukraine would remain a non-aligned country, a kind of Finland, and if it would be federalized: a federal state with a high degree of autonomy in each part of Ukraine. Russia would also appreciate it if Ukraine would recognize the Russian language as a second state language, or at least a regional language. More than 50% of Ukrainian citizens speak Russian or consider Russian as their mother tongue. There are precedents when in some countries, two, or even three state languages were recognized - in Finland, for example, Finnish and Swedish are two state languages. Finland remained a neutral state, never joined NATO though it eventually became a full member of the European Union. Finland has been friendly with the Soviet Union/Russia and has very active economic cooperation with its gigantic neighbor. Many political thinkers support the idea of the Finlandization of Ukraine.

Let's also not forget that in 882 Kiev became the capital city of Rus' where East Slavs converted to Christianity in 988. Because of this historic event, Kiev is considered by Russians and by a significant number of Ukrainians as their common Jerusalem. Therefore, for Russia to see Kiev in a military union like NATO is something like for London to see Scotland in a military union with China. It's very painful for them. So you can see the roots of Russia's resentment.

IA Forum: Do the U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia bear any weight with Putin or are that effective?

Dr. Urbanovich: Of course, sanctions are painful. But the question is - what does the West want to achieve? What is the ultimate goal? What message are we sending? Do we want Russia to withdraw from the Crimean Peninsula? It is not realistic, it is a fait accompli. So what is our main goal? Putin made a statement that Russia wants Ukraine to remain in its contemporary borders, but they want Ukraine to be a friendly state to Russia. They also support the idea that

Ukraine should be a federal state, that the Russian language should be recognized as second official language, and that the aspirations of the Russian speaking population should be taken into account.

IA Forum: Does the annexation of Crimea undermine the credibility of Western powers? Does that send a certain message that Western powers are weak because they spoke out against it and imposed sanctions that weren't very effective?

Dr. Urbanovich: This is a very special case speaking about the Crimean Peninsula. Therefore, we need to take into account the historical and political aspects in all their complexities. In my view, to a certain extent, the West contributed to this crisis. Of course, Viktor Yanukovych was an inconceivably corrupt president who carries tremendous responsibility for the situation that has developed in Ukraine. But in Russia, the EU statements and actions were interpreted as Ukraine has to be either with the EU or with Russia: a zero sum game. It is simply unacceptable taking into account, for example, that Ukraine's exports to Russia account for nearly a quarter of Ukrainian external trade and that industries located in eastern Ukraine have strong links with Russia. Let's not forget that during the Soviet Union, it was an indivisible industrial complex. Therefore, all these factors have to be taken into account.

IA Forum: And how is the crisis playing in Russia?

Dr. Urbanovich: There are a certain number of people who are against the actions of Russia, particularly liberal circles. But according to official statistics, over 90% of Russian citizens supported the decision to incorporate Crimea into the Russian Federation. By the way, Mikhail Gorbachev made the following statement: "Previously, the Crimea was annexed to Ukraine under Soviet law, meaning the Communist party did it without asking the people. Now the people themselves have decided to correct this mistake. We should welcome their decision, rather than impose sanctions for it."

IA Forum: Do these events allow Putin to ignore certain issues in Russia?

Dr. Urbanovich: Do you mean human rights? Putin's approval rating has increased in the past several weeks based on, first of all, the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi. Frankly, they were really well organized despite pretty negative coverage in our mass media. Ultimately, they fixed everything and the opening and closing ceremonies were very impressive. However, corruption remains a huge problem. I am afraid that Russia's isolation might trigger an attack on dissent in Russia.

IA Forum: Do you think Russia will be isolated at all from the EU or from the U.S.?

Dr. Urbanovich: For a certain period of time, yes, most likely. But the problem is that, speaking about global economy, everything is so interdependent that I don't think we will undertake very serious measures, because it might backfire, on one hand. On the other hand, we might create a vacuum. Using very vigorous sanctions would create new opportunities to trade with Russia that could be easily taken by certain countries like China, India, South Korea, Japan and also some countries in South East Asia. So, I don't think there would be tremendous support of economic

sanctions, especially in Europe. The U.S. has a very insignificant trade balance with Russia, but speaking about Europe, they have a huge trade balance with Russia, it's around 400 billion dollars, and they depend on Russia's energy supplies, especially Germany. Six thousand German companies and firms do business in Russia.

Also, Russia objectively needs reorientation towards Asia. Let's not forget that the development of Siberia and Russia's Far East is considered in Russia as a question of national security and a huge national modernization project. Therefore, Moscow is expected to supply China with gas, to engage China in its projects, and Russia also hopes to gain Chinese political support on the global stage. On the other hand, Moscow is also trying to balance China with other Asian countries. Specifically, I believe that the Crimean case could create a chance for Moscow and Tokyo to settle the Kuril Islands dispute.

IA Forum: The media is being alarmist about the situation but you believe it will be resolved peacefully?

Dr. Urbanovich: The problem is that the West became accustomed to the state of affairs of the 1990s when Russia was a weak country, an insignificant player in the international arena. It was a period when Russia was so fragile that there were academic discussions even of disintegrating Russia into several independent entities. In the last decade, Russia stood up from its knees. Naturally, Russia wants its national interests to be recognized, particularly its security concerns. I think we need to have a very serious discussion at the national and international levels of how to deal with the emerging powers, including Russia. But I would like to repeat my previous thought that the isolation of Russia is not a solution. Channels of active communication have to be kept open.

Current U.S. Secretary of State John F. Kerry emphasized in his speech on February 20, 2013 at the University of Virginia that "to deploy troops is much more expensive than to deploy diplomats." This, in my view, is a very wise statement.

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