The Disputed Ukrainian Knot

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the precarious relationship between Russia and Ukraine represents the cornerstone of a complex set of processes which imprinted the post-Soviet transition in both successor states. Yet the tragic events which marked the 2013–14 crisis and the following developments were driven mostly by external actors/factors.

Clearly, domestic factors interacted together with the external dimension of the Ukrainian affair, but in the end it was the "ambiguity" of Ukraine's geopolitical location, as a buffer zone between the enlarged EU and NATO, and the Russian Federation, which mobilised the competing powers (the US, the EU and Russia) in a zero sum game. The Ukrainian affair in turn has in many respects replaced the process of Yugoslav dissolution. The dramatic collapse of the Yugoslav Federation in 1991 paved the way for a set of interpretations among policy makers and experts, about the right to get access to self-determination. Different interpretations markedly divided the international community, at first the US/EU on the one side and Russia (and China) on the other (Huttenbach & Privitera 1999). Hence, the national question (and all its implications) remains the main political issue on the agenda of European affairs, since the Balkan question is still open (Bosnia and Kosovo remain divisive issues within the international community), as well as in the post-Soviet space. In addition, the EU itself has started to be affected by national questions, since the Scottish/Brexit issue and the Catalan self-determination process have triggered a set of crises which are affecting the stability of the Union as never before.

1 The National Question in Post-Soviet Times: The Russia-Ukraine Nexus

"Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian Empire", stated Zbigniew Brzezinski (1996). From the very moment of the Soviet Union's demise, the relationship between Ukraine and Russia became crucial. Already, Kiev declared its own self-determination in the aftermath of the putsch in Moscow, as did Georgia and the Baltics definitively. On the 6th of September 1991 the Baltics were out, but El'tsin was trying to preserve ties between Russia and Ukraine. As

the USSR under Gorbachev's leadership was moribund, El'tsin, at the peak of his power, joined an agreement with the Belarusian and Ukrainian leaders to create a new entity, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The presidents of the three republics declared the USSR terminated on the 8th of December. On December 21st the remaining republics, except Georgia, adhered to the CIS, and on December 25th Gorbachev resigned and the red flag flew over the Kremlin for the last time.

The existence of the CIS was problematic from the very beginning. Although the partners recognised each other's existing borders and agreed on a common currency, on joint control of nuclear power and on a single economic area, de facto each of them moved in opposite directions. Yet the international treaties and obligations of the former USSR remained valid and Russia took responsibility for all of them, at least initially. Russia got the USSR's place on the Security Council and the UN recognised all the successor states. However, quarrels among the members about minority issues, economic cooperation, and territorial disputes troubled the CIS during 1992, and it was unable to exercise any form of coordination. A CIS summit meeting in January 1993 failed to find compromises on the different controversies within the Commonwealth. Gradually, Russia reaffirmed control over the other member states, using its economic leverage and taking advantage of the instability in some of them (Tajikistan first of all). Although the CIS failed to replace the USSR, it still managed to preserve cooperative relations between Russia and Ukraine, at least at the beginning of the 1990s.

In the early 1990s El'tsin and Ukrainian president Kravchuk were able to manage the tricky issue of the 12 million Russian inhabitants of Ukraine, avoiding a possible crisis similar to the Moldovan one and the creation of a separatist Russian republic (as in the case of Dniestr republic). Both leaders agreed to soften any possible nationalist attitude, as well as broad autonomy for the Crimean province. El'tsin proved to be consistent with his policy, repulsing the attempt by some Russian nationalists both in Russia and the Crimea to push for the province's independence, and for it to re-join the Russian federation. Hence El'tsin was assessed by his opponents as too moderate and unable to properly protect Russian minorities in neighbouring countries.

Quite surprisingly, if compared with the situation after 2014, in 1991 relations between Russians and Ukrainians in Ukraine were relaxed and cooperative. The results of the referendum showed massive participation by Russians in favour of Ukrainian self-determination. In Moscow people were a bit shocked by this outcome, as if a certain frustration about Soviet centralism was understandable; such a desire for independence and loyalty to Kiev was quite unexpected. Interestingly enough, very few Russian Army officials (including ethnic

Russians) left, as the absolute majority preferred to be loyal to the new Ukrainian State. Pro-independence support in the referendum in the mining areas of Donets'k, where Russians represented (and represent) the majority, was 83.9%, in Odesa 85.3%, and in Kharkiv as a whole 86.3% (Steele 1994: 214).

Leonid Kravchuk was able to successfully manage the self-determination process amid the demise of the Soviet Union thanks to his ability to use anti-Soviet frustration not as an ethnic narrative (as was happening between Serbs and Croats in the framework of the demise of Yugoslavia). On the contrary, both the old Communist elite and the new Ukrainian nationalists prevented a split along ethnic lines, and ordinary Ukrainians and Russians in Ukraine remained calm.

Ukrainian nationalism emerged late during *perestroika* when compared to other Soviet republics (the Baltics or Georgia). It started, similar to other cases, as an environmental protest before taking on a political form. At the beginning, it was an understandable reaction to the Chernobyl tragedy in April 1986. The search for political responsibility moved intellectuals to first organise a form of protest, asking for the area to be cleaned up. Then an ecological movement was created called *Zelenyi Svit* (Green World), with the goal of organizing a political framework, and this moved very rapidly into the raising of the Ukrainian issue. Chernobyl became the symbol of the Soviet Union's exploitation of Ukraine. Moving from ecological protection to cultural and language protection were the next logical steps. The Ukrainian environment could only be protected if the cultural heritage and the linguistic freedom (of the Ukrainian language, as the official language of expression) became the pillars of the new Ukrainian state.

Like El'tsin, Kravchuk was a pragmatic nationalist; he understood quite rapidly that the national question was the only narrative capable of mobilizing a very primordial civic society in the struggle for power. Promoting Ukrainian sovereignty became the password of the local communist leadership, mitigated by a vague understanding of a renewed Soviet federation. For those communists educated under the ideological constraints of the Leninist approach to the national question (albeit revised by Stalin in the Thirties), the concept of sovereignty was quite familiar, although this concept was mostly theoretical, it was compatible with a federative understanding of the new state.

El'tsin, like Gorbachev, was aware that preserving unity with Ukraine would be of paramount importance for Russia, for several reasons: control over nuclear weapons, economic interdependence (Russia depended on Ukraine for the production of engines for missiles, while Ukraine depended on Russia for energy), but also because of the cultural and symbolic ties between the two. In the end, without Ukraine the whole architecture of any possible Confederation,

Union or Commonwealth among the remaining Soviet entities (as the Baltics were already moving westward) would not be politically credible.

In any case El'tsin's attempt to overcome the disintegration of the Soviet Union by setting up of new Commonwealth failed immediately, since the nuclear issue was solved very soon through specific negotiations with the US. Full access to sovereignty for Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan was compensated for by the dismissal of their nuclear weapons, returned to Russia to be dismantled, as stated in the Budapest agreement brokered by the US. Without nuclear constraints, the level of cooperation among the four successor states decreased immediately, and different nationalist domestic visions prevailed, at first in Russia. Embarking on a very difficult and exhausting transition to a market economic system, Russia with its unclear system of checks and balances, precipitated into two years of instability. In 1993 the bombing of the White House in Moscow "celebrated" the end of the tumultuous years of the demise of the Soviet Union and the beginning of a new phase of El'tsin's rule over Russia. Advocating extended executive power to the president, El'tsin got enormous (personal) power. After two years of political struggle between the President (Yeltsin) and the Duma (set up mostly by Communist party members, led by Rutskoi) Russia reformed its constitution, offering extended powers to the President following the French model of the 2nd Republic.

Similarly, in Ukraine the chaotic early 1990s were followed by the recovery of state power by President Leonid Kuchma, with the adoption of a new Constitution in 1996. Technically, the system was semi-presidential, though with a longer presidential period by Kuchma (1994–2005; 2010–2014), alternating with a premier–presidential system in 2006–2010 and after 2014. The state is unitary with one federal unit of Crimea, which worked well enough as a compromise until 2014 (Pikulicka-Wilczewska & Sakwa 2015).

According to the constitution the state language of Ukraine is Ukrainian. Russian is widely spoken, especially in eastern and southern Ukraine. In the 2001 census 67.5% of the population declared Ukrainian as their native language and 29.6% declared Russian. Most native Ukrainian speakers know Russian as a second language. Russian was the *de facto* official language of the Soviet Union but both Russian and Ukrainian were official languages in the Soviet Union and in the schools of the Ukrainian Republic learning Ukrainian was mandatory. Effective in August 2012, a new law on regional language was passed and any local language spoken by at least a 10 percent minority was declared official within that area. Russian was downgraded as a regional language in several southern and eastern provinces and cities. Russian can now be used in these cities'/oblasts' administrative offices and documents. On 23 February 2014, following the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution, the Ukrainian Parliament voted

to repeal the law on regional languages, making Ukrainian the sole state language at all levels; however, the repeal was not signed by then acting President Turchynov or the current President Poroshenko.

Ukrainian is mainly spoken in western and central Ukraine. In western Ukraine, Ukrainian is also the dominant language in the cities. In central Ukraine, Ukrainian and Russian are equally used in cities, with Russian being more common in Kiev, while Ukrainian is the dominant language in rural communities. In eastern and southern Ukraine, Russian is more widespread in the cities, and Ukrainian is spoken in the rural areas.

For a large part of the Soviet era, the number of Ukrainian speakers declined from generation to generation, and by the mid-1980s usage of the Ukrainian language in public life had decreased significantly. Following independence, the government of Ukraine began to restore the Ukrainian language through a policy of "Ukrainisation". Today for example, most foreign films and TV programs, including Russian ones, are subtitled or dubbed in Ukrainian.

According to the Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea Ukrainian was the only state language of the Republic. However, the republic's constitution specifically recognised Russian as the language of the majority of its population and guaranteed its usage "in all spheres of public life". Similarly, the Crimean Tatar Language – the language of 12.1 percent of the population of Crimea, according to the last Ukraine Population Census of 2001 (Upc 2001) – was guaranteed special state protection, as well as the "languages of other ethnicities". Since unification with Russia the rights of the Crimean Tatars have been drastically reduced. Russian speakers constitute an overwhelming majority of the Crimean population (77 percent), with 11.4% Crimean Tatar speakers and just 10.1% Ukrainian speakers (Statdata 2019). But in everyday life the majority of Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians in Crimea use Russian. Yet the Ukrainisation process moved Ukraine into the ethnicisation process of identity.

El'tsin too was very pragmatic in using nationalism as a political tool. El'tsin's main goal was to overthrow the communist federations, not because of ideological reasons but because they were no longer functional for his own political project.

In the Soviet case, El'tsin used nationalism in the political struggle against Gorbachev in order to weaken the Soviet leader. Supporting self-determination processes in the Baltics (or in Georgia) as El'tsin did, would increase Russian legitimacy in relation to its own sovereignty. From El'tsin's perspective this was the only way to achieve the goal of the reforms as promoted within the so-called "500 days of shock therapy", in order to introduce a fully functioning market system. Like the Bolsheviks (Lenin), El'tsin was unable to implement the reform process at large, across the entire Soviet space. So, he used the

national question to focus it on Russian soil only (like Lenin did, see Huttenbach & Privitera 1999). As Russian identity was based on the Soviet landscape, political mobilisation could only be accomplished by adopting a victimisation perspective, transforming Russians into the first victims of the Soviet Union. As victims themselves, Russians must be generous with other peoples (like in the Baltics), supporting their own self-determination processes. Nevertheless, while El'tsin was contributing to destroying the Soviet Union, on the other hand he was supporting Gorbachev in the final attempt to transform it into a Union, and then a Commonwealth of sovereign states. El'tsin remained confident that a certain type of cooperation would remain in force among the post-Soviet states and that Russia would remain its own centre of gravity, naturally. This would happen because of Russia's size, economic interdependence, cultural ties, and last but not least, because many of the leaders came from the same Communist party elite with a long history of common relations and mind-set.

Thus, in the end El'tsin did not use any significant form of assertiveness in Russia's relations with its neighbouring post-Soviet countries (except for the Baltics, between 1992/93). In the Baltic case independence was achieved not only through a strong anti-Soviet approach, but an anti-Russian one too. Baltic nationalisms were constructed along the ethnic division between us vs. the Russians, which moved into a very rapid deterioration of the mutual relations between the Baltic States and Russia, while El'tsin (as well as the Russians in the Baltics) was supportive of the local self-determination processes at the beginning.

This is the key: Russian nationalism (in El'tsin's mode) was not based on ethnicity, but on the imperial/Soviet landscape, providing a sense of power and superiority over the other communities, similar to the relationship between the centre and the colonial periphery. The main issue in the current Ukrainian affair is that for the first time, Russian identity is also going to be based on the ethnic dimension. In the end the Ukrainian conflict has promoted the ethnicisation of the Russian identity; as for the Ukrainian one, the process started earlier.

2 Behind the 2014 "Ukraine Crisis": An Historical, Economic and Political Background

In order to understand the origins of the national question in Ukraine within the framework of the 2014 crisis, it is useful to refer to some historical matters. The Dnieper River roughly divides the two main geographical areas of

Ukrainian identity: the right bank (as the river flows), and the left bank. The left bank (the east side of Ukraine), which includes the current regions of Crimea, Dnipropetrovs'k, Donets'k, Kharkiv, Kherson, Luhans'k, Odesa, Mykolaïv, and Zaporizhzhia, represents a relatively compact ethnic and cultural area that is distinguished by the strong influence of Russian culture, even though the majority of the population still defines itself as Ukrainian. The right bank (the western side of Ukraine) includes Galicia and the Cossack hetmanate and represents a relatively compact ethnic area that is the Ukrainian speaking area, mostly supportive of Ukrainian nationalism. The division of Ukraine into these two areas has also been reproduced by electoral patterns. Since 1994 voting has been quite stably split between these two electoral groups, which usually vote for opposing candidates of parties referring to a pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian perspective (Petro 2018).

From the beginning the main political issue has been the country's international position, reflect in the domestic political arena. For east Ukrainians (mostly Russian speakers) the country has to preserve its ties with the Russian Federation and possibly the rest of the former Soviet community. On the opposite side, western Ukrainians prefer the establishment of strong connections with the EU and western countries at large.

Such different perspectives remained contained up until the 2014 crisis, as they reflected the political alternation of cabinets and presidencies representing the two visions. However, such a political division produced a highly consociational and corrupt political system ruled by oligarchs representing the two main communities.

A brief overview of electoral trends in the period 1994–2014 may represent the stability of the electoral pattern, but also external factors which influenced the vote. In connection to this matter, Western Ukrainians neglect of the Russian-speaking community and the Russian identity of those of the left bank, by introducing the "Ukrainisation" of the country, did not contribute to increasing mutual respect and understanding (Petro 2016).

The language issue became one of the first challenges to the unity and integrity of the country. The two groups started to divide themselves into two parallel societies with opposite goals. Evidence of this arose during the so-called "Euromaidan".

According to the western perspective, the current crisis originated in an attempt by Ukrainians to free themselves of centuries-old Russian colonial oppression, while Moscow has resisted it in every way, and "as soon as Ukraine would go, European values would triumph in Kiev". The main misunderstanding in the western perception of the self-determination processes that occurred in post-communist societies is that those processes have to be understood as a

vehicle for the promotion of democratisation and civic values. On the contrary, nationalism is not a vehicle for democracy per-se, due to its intrinsic assertive/ oppressive dimensions.

During the Euromaidan crisis the western approach encouraged the inflexibility of the position of the Kiev government which came to power riding the wave of protest, and that in turn contributed to the loss of Crimea and to the civil war in the Southeast. Similarly, when Croatia declared its own independence in 1991, western support increased the rigidity of the Croat government against the Serb minority, contributing to the civil war in Krajina and Slavonia. Russians in Ukraine do not represent such a distinctive national group as other large minorities in other countries. The issue is that both contemporary Russians and Ukrainians (at least inhabitants of the lands of the former Russian Empire, that is the majority of contemporary Ukraine) originate from people with a common identity (All-Russian, "orthodox"), where the differences between Great Russians ("Russians") and Little Russians ("Ukrainians") were rather of a regional sub-ethnic nature. It would be more correct to consider Russians, alongside Ukrainians, as a state-constituting nation of Ukraine within its 2013 borders, and not a national minority (Pikilcka-Wilcezewska and Sakwa 2015).

In any case, it is clear that the polarisation in Ukraine originated with the political manipulation of two main issues: the status of the Russian language and the preferred direction of integration (to the West or to the East). It is no accident that the pretext for the beginning of mass protests in autumn 2013 was Ianukovych's decision to delay the signing of the Association and Free Trade Agreement with the EU. The first issue on the agenda of the Ukrainian parliament on the day of the Ianukovych's ousting on 22 February 2014 was the repeal of the liberal Kolesnichenko-Kivalov language law, which triggered protests in the Southeast, that were later called "the Russian Spring". In addition, in the past year another topic has joined the two, further contributing to the split in the Ukrainian society, namely the preferred form of power structure in Ukraine: unitary state or federation.

During its independence Ukraine has been one of worst governed states in Europe, led by a group of rapacious oligarchs organizing a very delicate elite balance first managed by President Kuchma. As Wilson correctly analyses, in contrast to Russia, Ukraine is not a resource state but a rentier state, as it does not have the abundant energy resources of Russia (or Azerbaijan). It has energy transit and raw materials, and a model of steel and chemical production based on rents from subsidised state inputs. So, Ukraine has enough rent for a corrupt elite, but not enough to pay for a social contract, like Russia, or even using Russian money, like in Belarus (Wilson 2014: 104).

In Soviet times the economy of Ukraine was the second largest in the Soviet Union, an important industrial and agricultural component of the country's planned economy. With the dissolution of the Soviet system the country moved from a planned economy to a market economy. The transition was difficult for the majority of the population, which plunged into poverty. Ukraine's economy contracted severely following the years after the Soviet dissolution. Day-to-day life for the average person living in Ukraine was a struggle. A significant number of citizens in rural Ukraine survived by growing their own food, often working two or more jobs and buying the basic necessities through the barter economy.

In 1991 the government liberalised most prices to combat widespread product shortages and was successful in overcoming the problem. At the same time, the government continued to subsidise state-run industries and agriculture by uncovered monetary emission. The loose monetary policies of the early 1990s pushed inflation to hyperinflationary levels. For the year 1993, Ukraine holds the world record for inflation in one calendar year.

Those living on fixed incomes suffered the most. Prices stabilised only after the introduction of the new currency, the hryvnia, in 1996. The country was also slow to implement structural reforms. Following independence, the government created a legal framework for privatisation. However, widespread resistance to reforms within the government and from a significant part of the population soon stalled the reform efforts. A large number of state-owned enterprises were exempt from privatisation.

In the meantime, by 1999 gdp had fallen to less than 40% of its 1991 level. It recovered considerably in the following years, but in 2014 had yet to reach its historical maximum. In the early 2000s the economy showed strong export-based growth of 5 to 10%, with industrial production growing more than 10% per year. Ukraine was then hit by the economic crisis of 2008 and in November, the imf approved a stand-by loan of US$ 16.5 billion for the country.

The country imports most of its energy, especially oil and natural gas, and to a large extent depends on Russia as its energy supplier. While 25% of the natural gas in Ukraine comes from internal sources, about 35% comes from Russia and the remaining 40% from Central Asia through transit routes that Russia controls. At the same time, 85% of Russian gas is delivered to western Europe through Ukraine.

Growing sectors of the Ukrainian economy include information technology (IT), which topped all other Central and Eastern European countries in 2007, growing some 40 percent. In 2013, Ukraine ranked fourth in the world for the number of certified IT professionals after the United States, India and Russia.

As Wilson says: "Ukraine is a new state with many underlying divisions of ethnicity, language, and religion, although the most powerful division of all is regional and regional-based patronal networks. These well-known internal divisions would have been less of a factor in the break-up of the country if Ukrainian politicians had been brave enough or competent enough to transcend them. Instead, they have exploited and exacerbated them to stay in power. Moreover, it was politicians from eastern Ukraine who did most of the polarising. Ideology and the idea of a European destiny were stronger forces in western Ukraine, so public opinion was harder to manipulate, although there were many nationalist politicians capable of alienating voters in the East. But a post-Soviet culture of paternalism, social atomisation, and Soviet Ukrainian mythology was still strong in the East and South, where politicians were able to win and retain power with a mixture of welfare and patronage and so-called "political technology" that exploited anti-Western Ukrainian stereotypes" (Wilson 2014: 105).

Ianukovych's presidency was not capable of maintaining such a mixture. More precisely, its ability to distribute even limited economic benefits was increasingly circumscribed. Ianukovych's predatory state destroyed growth in Ukraine and even the ruling Party of Regions began to lose support in their East Ukrainian heartlands and was increasingly dependent on fraud and political technology to divide and corrupt the opposition to stay in power.

3 Conclusion

As emerges from this historical reconstruction, defining the identity of Russia and Ukraine today is extremely complicated as both countries are still involved in their own state-building processes. Indeed, the intimate intricacy of the common past between Russians and Ukrainians since the Middle Ages, makes the issue impossible to solve.

The Russian Federation is a legacy of its imperial past and the absence of a genuine Russian nation–state. It was created in the 1920s from the territories left over after the borders of the non-Russian Union republics had been determined. More than 25 million Russophones live in bordering countries and still Russia does not have a state with uncontested borders. Moreover, the conceptualisation of the Russian nation remains rooted in the socialist concept articulated by Aleksandr Herzen in the 1840s and 1850s (Tolz 2001: 272). Within the socialist definition of national community, the symbolic elevation of the "masses" to the level of sole representative of the nation went hand in hand with the view of the idea of Russian uniqueness, from religious to linguistic

patterns. This implies that membership in the Russian nation could not be voluntary. Consequently, it is not conducive to democratisation either. Only recently did the phenomenon of a democratic concept of a civic nation of equal citizens, with voluntary membership, enter the discourse of Russian political elites (Tolz 2001: 273). In any case, the 2018 presidential elections in Russia and the confirmation of Putin's post shows that the crucial period of Russian nation-building is still far from over, and it remains unclear, whether or not this is the destination of Russia's post-communist transition.

"Putin has described Ukraine as an "artificial state" whose territory has often changed in the course of the twentieth century. More importantly, Putin has repeatedly stated that "the Russian and Ukrainian people are practically one people", with "common historical roots, and a common destiny, we have a common religion, a common faith, we have a similar culture, language, tradition, and mentality" (Wilson 2014: 148–149)

If this is so, as reported by the bbc, a "common destiny" implies that Ukraine can only have a future alongside Russia – not outside Russia's sphere of influence in Europe – "while Putin's conservative values project is promoted with Europe and the West vilified as decadent and a lower civilisation compared to Russia" (Ukraine bbc Monitoring 2014).

Kuzio's consideration confirms: "Controlling Ukraine is not only a strategic objective for Russia to regain its great power status, but an important component of its national identity that has always stressed the unity of the three Eastern Slavic peoples, beginning in Kievan Rus' and continuing to Tsarist Russia and the USSR, with the CIS Customs Union-Eurasian Union their natural home (not NATO or the EU). Spiritual unity is provided by the Russian Orthodox Church, which has a greater number of parishes in Ukraine than in the Russian Federation" (Kuzio 2016: 118).

As Kuzio states again, "Putin came to power soon after NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia, the detachment of Kosovo into a future independent state, and the Bulldozer revolution in Serbia that was the first of what became called coloured or democratic revolutions. Kosovo had never been a Yugoslav republic and therefore, unlike the fifteen Soviet and six Yugoslav republics, it had no right under international law to become an independent state, a fact that Russian leaders have continually raised in their justification of the annexation of the Crimea" (Kuzio 2016: 119).

In this sense, Putin is genuinely convinced that coloured revolutions are orchestrated by the West (including the mass protests in Russia in 2011 against Putin's regime) in order to overthrow the current Russian regime. The Ukraine affair has been perceived by Moscow as an attempt to push Russia into turbulent times, with the intent by the West to shake Russian stability and prevent its

own power from being renewed. What appears to be a novelty in the Ukrainian crisis is the ethnicisation of the conflict, which represents on the Ukrainian side the "natural outcome" of the two-decades long Ukrainisation process, and on the Russian side, similarly, the need to reinforce their self-identity like the Serbs and Croats in the mixed areas of Croatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina. In light of the so-called Ukraine Crisis, today it is the increasing ideological competition that still reveals the permeability of the nation-building process in Russia and Ukraine.

As Petro argues in his essay "The Tragedy of Ukraine", the path to peace, both inside Ukraine and between Ukraine and Russia, is thus one and the same – dialogue and reconciliation. Ukrainians, regardless of their religion, language, and cultural heritage, embrace the whole country. Apparently, this is the message that millions of voters sent at the last presidential election in 2019, as Volodymyr Zelens'kyi, a Russophone comedian, was elected as the President of Ukraine, with massive votes in most of the regions, thus overcoming the traditional polarisation between the West and the East. Whether Zelens'kyi and Putin will be able to settle the "Ukrainian Knot" remains to be seen, but it is the only possible solution.

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