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Ukraine: Tragedy of a Nation Divided (1800 words)

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Interference by the United States and its NATO allies in Ukraine's civil struggle has exacerbated the crisis within Ukraine, undermined the possibility of bringing the two easternmost provinces back under Kyiv's control, and raised the **specter of possible conflict** between nuclear-armed powers. Furthermore, in denying that Russia has a "right" to oppose extension of a hostile military alliance to its national borders, the United States ignores its own history of declaring and enforcing for two centuries a sphere of influence in the Western hemisphere.

The fact is, **Ukraine is a state but not yet a nation**. In the thirty years of its independence, it has not yet found a leader who can unite its citizens in a shared concept of Ukrainian identity. Yes, Russia has interfered, but it is not Russian interference that created Ukrainian disunity but rather the **haphazard way the country was assembled from parts that were not always mutually compatible**.

The territory of the Ukrainian state claimed by the government in Kyiv was assembled, not by Ukrainians themselves but by outsiders, and took its present form following the end of **World War II**. To think of it as a

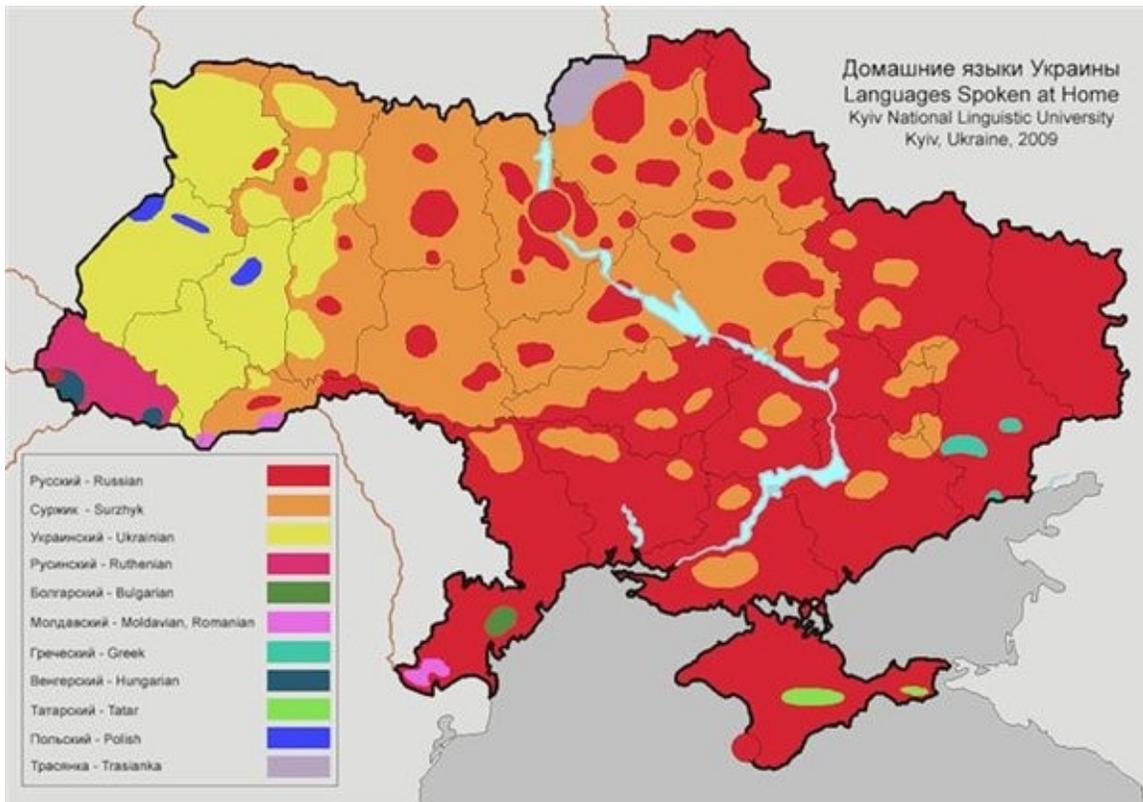
traditional or primordial whole is absurd. This applies a fortiori to the two most recent additions to Ukraine—that of some eastern portions of interwar Poland and Czechoslovakia, annexed by **Stalin** at the end of the war, and the largely Russian-speaking **Crimea**, which was transferred from the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic (RSFSR) well after the war, when **Nikita Khrushchev** controlled the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Since all constituent parts of the USSR were ruled from Moscow, it seemed at the time a paper transfer of no practical significance. (Even then, the city of **Sevastopol**, the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet, was subordinated directly to Moscow, not Kyiv.) Up to then, the Crimea had been considered an integral part of Russia since **Catherine II “the Great”** conquered it in the 18th century.



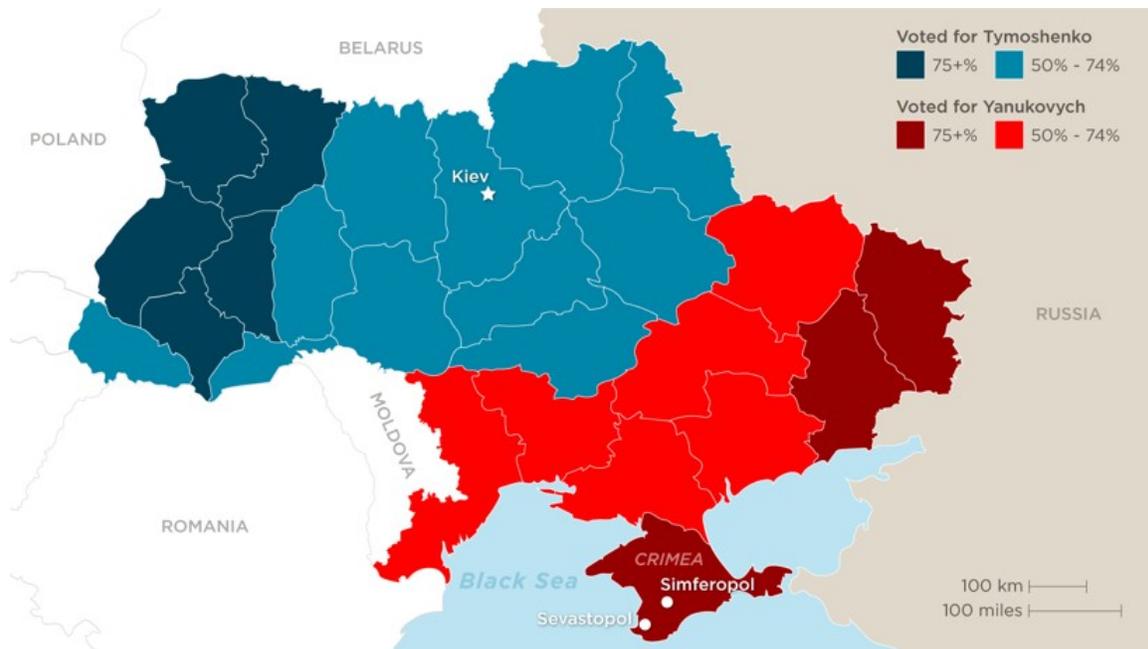
The lumping together of people with strikingly different historical experience and comfortable in different (though closely related) languages

underlies the current divisions. If one takes **Galicia** and adjoining provinces in the west on the one hand and the **Donbas** and **Crimea** in the east and south on the other as exemplars of the extremes, the areas in between are mixed, proportions gradually shifting from one tradition to the other. There is no clear dividing line, and Kyiv/Kiev would be claimed by both.

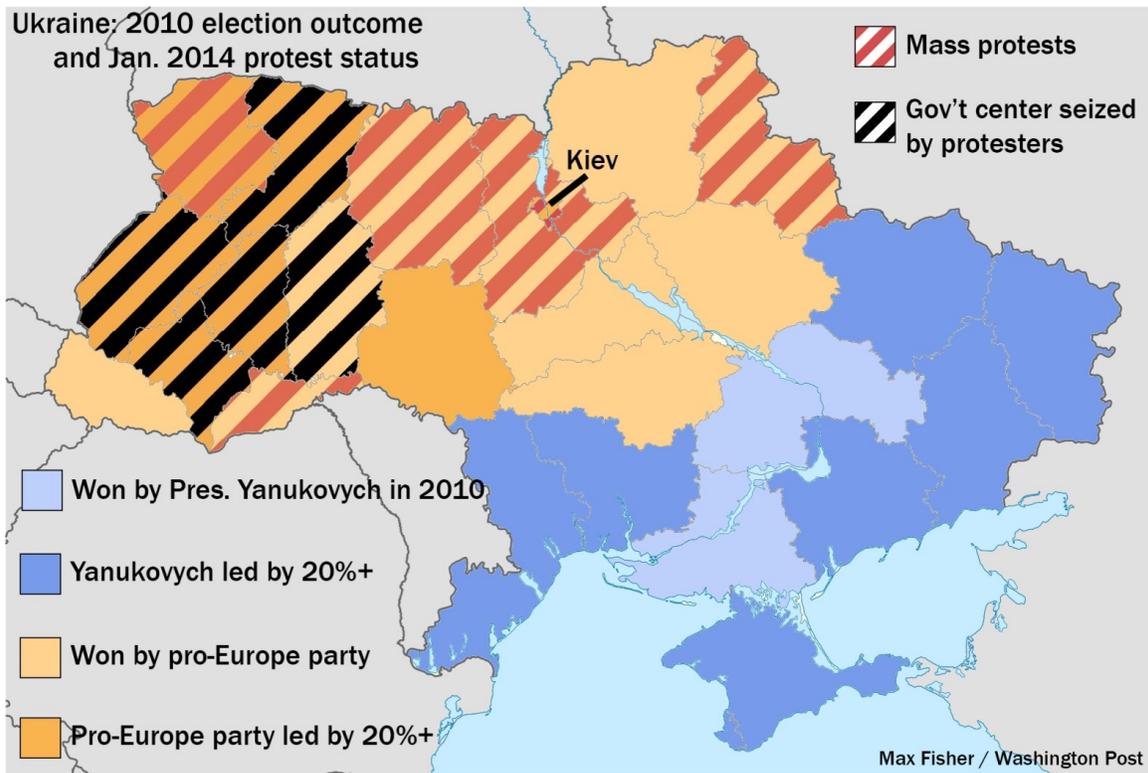


From its inception as an internationally recognized independent state, **Ukraine has been deeply divided along linguistic and cultural lines.** Nevertheless, it has maintained a unitary central government rather than a federal one that would permit a degree of local autonomy. The constitution gave the elected president the power to appoint the chief executives in the provinces (*oblasti*) rather than having them subject to election in each province—as is the case, for example—in the United

States. Note in the following map of election results in 2010, **how closely the political divide in Ukraine parallels the linguistic divide.**



The **Ukrainian revolution of 2014** started with protests over **President Yanukovich's** decision not to sign an agreement with the European Union. The United States and the EU openly supported the demonstrators and spoke of detaching Ukraine from what one might call the Russian (past Soviet) security sphere and attaching it to the West through EU and NATO membership. Never mind that **Ukraine was unable at that time to meet the normal requirements for either EU or NATO membership.** Violence started, first in the Ukrainian nationalist West, with irregular militias taking over the local offices headed by Yanukovich appointees.



On **February 20, 2014**, demonstrations in Kyiv, which up to then had been largely peaceful, turned violent even though a compromise agreement had been reached to hold early elections. Many demonstrators were shot by sniper fire and **President Yanukovich** fled the country. Demonstration leaders claimed that the government's security force, the Berkut, was responsible for initiating the shooting, but subsequent trials failed to substantiate this. In fact, most of the sniper fire came from buildings controlled by the demonstrators.¹

¹ See Ivan Katchanovski, "The Maidan Massacre in Ukraine: Revelations from Trials and Investigations," NYU Jordan Center News, <https://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/the-maidan-massacre-in-ukraine-revelations-from-trials-and-investigation/#.Ybesob3MKUk>

The United States and most Western countries immediately recognized the successor government, but Russia and many Russian-speaking Ukrainians considered **Yanukovich's ouster the result of an illegal coup d'état**. A rebellion occurred in the Eastern provinces of **Donetsk** and **Luhansk** and Russia supported the rebels with military equipment and irregular forces.

In **Crimea**, local leaders declared independence and requested annexation by Russia. A referendum was conducted under the watchful eye of "little green men" infiltrated from Russia. There was no resistance by Ukrainian military or police forces, and **Russia officially annexed the peninsula** when the referendum resulted in an overwhelming pro-Russian vote. There was no fighting and no casualties in Crimea.

In **February 2015** an agreement was reached ("**Minsk agreement**") to bring the Donbas back under Kiev's control by allowing a degree of autonomy, including election of local officials, and amnesty for the secessionists. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian legislature (Verkhovna Rada) has refused to amend the constitution to provide for a federal system or to proclaim an amnesty for the secessionists.

Separate sets of U.S. and EU **economic sanctions against Russia** have been declared in respect to the Crimea and the Donbas, but most have seemed to stimulate hostile emotions rather than encourage solution of the problems. **What needs to be understood is that Russia perceives these issues as matters of vital national security.**

Russia is extremely sensitive about foreign military activity adjacent to its borders, as any other country would be and the United States always has been. It has signaled repeatedly that it **will stop at nothing to prevent NATO membership for Ukraine**. Nevertheless, eventual Ukrainian

membership in NATO has been an avowed objective of U.S. and NATO policy since the **Bush-Cheney administration**. This makes absolutely no sense. It is also dangerous to confront a nuclear-armed power with military threats on its border.

When I hear comments now such as, "Russia has no right to claim a 'sphere of influence,'" I am puzzled. **It is not a question of legal "rights" but of probable consequences.** It is as if someone announces, "We never passed a law of gravity so we can ignore it." No one is saying that Ukraine does not have a "right" to apply for NATO membership. **Of course it does.** The question is whether the members of the alliance would serve their own interest if they agreed. In fact they would assume a very dangerous liability.

I point this out as a veteran of the **Cuban missile crisis of 1962**. At that time I was assigned to the American embassy in Moscow and it fell to my lot to translate some of **Khrushchev's** messages to **President John Kennedy**. Why is it relevant? Just this: in terms of international law, the Soviet Union had a "right" to place nuclear weapons on Cuba when the Cuban government requested them, the more so since the United States had deployed nuclear missiles of comparable range that could strike the USSR from Turkey. But it was an **exceedingly dangerous move** since the United States had total military dominance of the Caribbean and under no circumstances would tolerate the deployment of nuclear missiles in its backyard. Fortunately for both countries and the rest of the world, **Kennedy and Khrushchev** were able to defuse the situation. Only later did we learn how close we came to a nuclear exchange.

As for the future, the only thing that will convince Moscow to withdraw its military support from the separatist regimes in the **Donbas** will be Kyiv's willingness to implement the Minsk agreement. As for the **Crimea,**

it is likely to be a de facto part of Russia for the foreseeable future, whether or not the West recognizes that as "legal." For decades, the U.S. and most of its Western allies refused to recognize the incorporation of the three Baltic countries in the Soviet Union. This eventually was an important factor in their liberation. However, the Crimea is quite different in one key respect: **most of its people, being Russian, prefer to be in Russia**. In fact, one can argue that it is in the political interest of Ukrainian nationalists to have Crimea in Russia. Without the votes from Crimea, **Viktor Yanukovich** would never have been elected president.

One persistent U.S. demand is that Ukraine's territorial integrity be restored. Indeed, the U.S. is party to the **Budapest Memorandum** in which Russia guaranteed Ukraine's territorial integrity in return for Ukraine's transfer of Soviet nuclear weapons to Russia for destruction in accord with U.S.-Soviet arms control agreements. What the U.S. demand ignores is that, under traditional international law, agreements remain valid *rebus sic stantibus* (things remaining the same).

When the Budapest memorandum was signed in 1994 there was no plan to expand NATO to the east and **Gorbachev** had been assured in 1990 that the alliance would not expand. When in fact it did expand right up to Russia's borders, Russia was confronted with a radically different strategic situation than existed when the Budapest agreement was signed.

Furthermore, Russians would argue that the **U.S. is interested in territorial integrity only when its interests are served**. American governments have a record of ignoring it when convenient, as when it and its NATO allies violated Serbian territorial integrity by creating and then recognizing an independent Kosovo. Also, the United States violated the principle when it supported the separation of South Sudan from Sudan, Eritrea from Ethiopia, and East Timor from Indonesia.

To the charge that **Russia is guilty of unprovoked aggression in Ukraine**, Russia would point out that the U.S. invaded Panama to arrest Noriega, invaded Grenada to prevent American citizens from being taken hostage (even though they had not been taken hostage), invaded and occupied Iraq on spurious grounds, maintains military forces in Syria without the permission of the Syrian government, targets people in other countries with drones. In other words, for the U.S. government to preach about respect for sovereignty and preservation of territorial integrity to a Russian president can seem a claim to special rights not allowed others.

Ultimately, all these legal arguments and appeals to abstract concepts are beside the point. **So far as Ukraine is concerned, it can never be a united, prosperous country unless it has reasonably close and civil relations with Russia.** That means, inter alia, giving its Russian-speaking citizens equal rights to their language and culture. That is a fact determined by geography and history. Ukraine's friends in Europe and North America should help them understand that rather than pursuing what could easily turn out to be a suicidal course.

Jack F. Matlock is a former U.S. ambassador to Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union and was a confidant of both Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. He is now a Visiting Scholar at Duke University and a speaker and panelist for the UNC Krasno Global Events Series.

Some books published by Jack Matlock:

- *Superpower Illusions: How Myths and False Ideologies Led America Astray – and How to Return to Reality* (Yale University Press, 2010);
- *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (Random House, 2004);
- *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Random House, 1995).

