Editor’s Note

This Perspectives on Europe issue on Ukraine brings together Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian scholars for a discussion of the 2014 Maidan “Revolution of Dignity,” the war in Eastern Ukraine, and social change. At the beginning of 2015, the news on the war was receding from the Western media. But there was no day without war-inflicted suffering or casualties. On January 24th, as this issue was being finalized, the separatists fired rockets into a market, schools, homes and shops in Mariupol, Ukraine’s southeastern city between mainland Russia and the Russian-annexed Crimean Peninsula. This war is Europe’s war. It opens the question of where Europe ends and the Russian empire begins. It brings issues of war, sovereignty and separatism, nationalism and democracy back to the forefront of European politics (cf. Dunn and Bobick 2014).

Anna Fournier asks “Why does Ukraine matter so much to Russia?” Drawing on anthropologist James Frazer’s work (1996 [1922]) on magic and religion, she examines the ways in which Russian authorities frame their relationship with Ukraine as Russia’s former spiritual center and cultural cradle or as the historical, cultural, and spiritual “heart of Russia.” Geopolitically, eastern enlargement of the European Union (EU) and NATO, especially since the 2008 conflict in Georgia, which Russia viewed as threatening to its interests, set the stage for the conflict in Ukraine (see Charap and Shapiro 2014). Unlike Western Europe and the United States, which have justified their expansion in terms of a nation’s right to choose its own political and economic system, Russia views its close neighbors as a vital interest and in terms of the politics of protection of Russians and Russian speakers. Article 61 of the Russian Constitution states that “the Russian Federation shall guarantee its citizens protection and patronage abroad.”1 It provides a legal foundation for Russia’s protectionist politics aimed at ethnic subjects, which in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, and, most recently, Crimea and Novorossiia in Eastern Ukraine have been interconnected with attempts to restrict the sovereignty of independent states.

The conflict in Ukraine reshapes ethnic boundaries and radicalizes ethnic divisions by making unity, as the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s did, hardly imaginable (see Hayden 2013). Recent studies have drawn our attention to cultural diversity and countered more ethnicity-focused perspectives towards the conflict in Ukraine (see Wanner 2014, Hrytsak 2014). Catherine Wanner in her article on linguistic and religious ambivalence and flexibility demonstrates how post-1991 Ukraine has been defined by the rising importance of the Ukrainian language and bilingualism; situational and contextual use of Russian and Ukrainian; and coexistence of both languages

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at different socioeconomic levels in both Eastern and Western Ukraine. This diversity, an outcome of post-Soviet Ukraine’s national policies, is being violently unmade by the Donbas war (cf. Wanner 2014). Deborah A. Jones, in this issue’s “Notes from the Field,” ethnographically illustrates how the Donbas conflict shapes ethnic boundaries and how people resist categorization. Vitalii, whom Jones met in Odessa, argues that, “We left Donbas because we were certain we were Ukrainians, but people in Ukraine treated us like we were from Donbas.”

Liza Skryzhevska, Dávid Karácsonyi, and Kateryna Botsu in this issue analyze the geographic, economic, and demographic specificity of the Donbas region arguing for its distinct Soviet and post-Soviet history and sociodemographic diversity. Their article is an important reminder that Eastern Ukraine is a region with diverse economic and demographic trends. Skryzhevska, Karácsonyi, and Botsu conclude that ethnic and socioeconomic factors are not sufficient to explain separatism in Donbas. There are no separatist actions in other eastern regions such as Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kharkiv, even if they share similar social and ethnic characteristics with the Donbas cities of Luhansk and Donetsk.

The Maidan “Revolution of Dignity,” the 2013–2014 political protests in Kyiv and other cities of Ukraine, was not an ethnic conflict. Neither was it a nationalist revolution, even if the rhetoric of nationalism defined some parties like Svoboda (Freedom) and Pravyi Sektor (Right Sector) and participants’ engagements (Gerasimov 2014, Hrytsak 2014). The Maidan started as the protest movement when the Ukrainian government called off preparations to sign an Association Agreement with the EU in November 2013. After the use of force against peaceful protesters on November 30, people rallied to overthrow Yanukovych’s corrupt authoritarian regime (Charap and Shapiro 2014). Ilya Gerasimov (2014) defines the Maidan as a “postcolonial revolution,” to integrate analytically its democratic potential, the hybrid nature of the national community, and people’s attempts to acquire their own voice and negotiate solidarity. The contributions to this issue show that the Maidan revolution has been a multifarious process, where forms of feminism, nationalism, patriarchal traditions, radicalism, and liberalism coexist. It has been a space of solidarity for various groups of people: the elderly and the young, people of different ethnic and political affiliations, of different gender and sexual orientations. “Europe,” as Serhy Yekelchyk states in this issue, was not the ultimate goal; it was a proxy for Ukraine’s democratic future and economic prosperity.

Tetyana Bureychak, Tamara Martsenyuk, and Marian J. Rubchak in their contributions approach the Maidan as a space for mini-revolutions and social transformations, reoccurring in the Donbas war. Unlike other revolutions in Ukraine, the Maidan was distinct for women’s activism (Phillips 2014, Martsenyuk, Rubchak this issue) and for the incorporation of
the LGBT community (Helbig, this issue). Feminists and LGBT rights activists fought alongside contemporary “Cossaks,” male-hero warriors. The Maidan provided opportunities for redefining gender roles and rearticulating national solidarities. Sarah Phillips (2014: 415) argues that feminists did pave the way for a “potential broadening of the base of Ukrainian feminism.” In the case of LGBT rights, although many LGBT people believed that their inclusion in the Maidan could be carried into law and everyday life, the general fear of homosexuality and other sexual identities prevailed in post-Maidan (Helbig, this issue).

The competing and interconnected processes of modernization – Westernization, Russification, and Ukrainization – have Soviet roots. Sergei Zhuk in his study of youth popular culture in the Ukrainian cities of Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, and Cherkasy reminds us that Russification and Westernization coexisted as connected projects of modernity during the Détente period (Zhuk, this issue). This period was also defined by the growing interest into Ukrainian national roots. Serhy Yekelchyk in this issue draws our attention to the importance of imperial disintegration and the construction of modern national identities since the nineteenth century. In his analysis of the Anti-Maidan as a counterrevolution, Yekelchyk analyzes the many facets of this movement—a diversity captured in the rhetorical figure “from Babushki to Titushki,” its difficulties in defining itself as an opposition, and its evolution into a separatist movement promoting the imperial project of “Novorossiia.”

The conflict reinforces the existing social and economic problems in Ukraine, such as unemployment and social exclusion (see Jones, this issue). These problems also include Ukraine’s HIV epidemics, one of the most severe in Eastern Europe. Jill Owczarzak and Sarah Phillips in this issue draw our attention to the lack of means for reducing HIV risk and providing therapy for patients, a paternalistic and bureaucratic approach within Ukraine’s system of narcology, as well as tensions among NGO’s, international funding organizations, and the government in Ukraine’s eastern and central regions.

The contributions to this issue invite us to think about the conflict in Ukraine as a complex historical process challenging the common binaries, which tend to frame the understanding of the conflict in the media and political discourse, such as Ukrainians vs. Russians, the West vs. the East, nationalism vs. democracy, and the state vs. people. The current conflict in Ukraine encourages us to look back at the break-up of the Soviet Union and the EU and NATO enlargement and ask why the Cold War has such a long afterlife.

Neringa Klumbytė
Editor
References


