

## REBORN RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM: AN ARGUMENT FOR THE WESTERN LIBERALIST INTERVENTION IN UKRAINE

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### Abstract

*The recent political unrest in central Europe has arisen due to an apparent domestic conflict of political will. However, foreign interference by the Great Powers is fuelling the exacerbation of this civil dissatisfaction into a potential proxy war. Ukraine serves as a physical buffer between the democratic liberalism of the West and the expansionistic goals of Russia, but is populated by a nation that predominantly seeks closer integration with the West. There is war in Ukraine, but it is between the majority pro-Western population and the pro-Russian government. The Ukrainian government has responded to pro-Western demonstrations with brutality, and therefore, every democratic nation has the responsibility to protect Ukrainian civilians from a government unwilling to do so. However, the manner by which Western democracies must respond remains unclear. The potential actions by the democratic West will be presented and critically evaluated. Constructivism will be used to explain the potential motivations behind Russian foreign policy initiatives and decisions. Through the perspectives of strategic advantage, economics, and human rights, we argue herewith that a liberalist approach by the Western powers is best suited to quell the rising conflict, manage detriments to human security, and preserve the integrity of the international political system.*

**Keywords:** Russia, Ukraine, World Politics, Strategic Studies, Peacekeeping, Foreign Policy

### Introduction

The recent unrest in central Europe defined by disagreements between Russia and Ukraine has been closely followed by key actors in international relations. In 2010, pro-Western Ukrainian president, Viktor Yushchenko, was defeated by Viktor Yanukovich (Osborn, 2010; Rennebohm, 2011). Yanukovich sought closer ties with Russia and orchestrated trade agreements designed to limit economic ties to the European Union (EU). These changes sparked Euromaidan, a political movement to replace Yanukovich with a pro-Western leader (Diuk, 2014). Supporters of Euromaidan sought closer association with the EU and desired to possible integration as a member nation. The success of the Euromaidan movement resulted in the election of pro-Western candidate, Petro Poroshenko, as president (Walker & Luhn, 2014). Subsequently, armed pro-Russian insurgency movements were identified in the Crimean peninsula and the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine (Sukhov, 2014; Yuhas, 2014). An autonomous republic of Ukraine, Crimea underwent a revolution by unidentified insurgents, which led to annexation by Russia (Yuhas, 2014). The violence continues in the Donbass region amongst suspicion that insurgents are in possession of Russian-supplied arms (Sukhov, 2014).

This essay will present a realist plan of action as well as a liberalist dictum for proposed action by the West. Given the Russian fear of Western expansion, previous Russian behaviours, and the ethnic volatility of Crimea and the Donbass region, a liberalist approach by the West will be established as the best avenue of engagement with Russia. Finally, constructivism is used to explain the impact of identity and history on Russian decision-making.

### **A Realist Solution to the Crisis in Ukraine**

A realist response of the West will include military intervention in the Ukraine and military aid for the Ukrainian army. Firstly, an allied Western military invasion is necessary to counteract the militarized nature of Russian occupations and insurgency (Sukhov, 2014; Yuhas, 2014). In 2008, the Russian government cited humanitarian intervention on behalf of pro-Russian separatist groups in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia of northern Georgia, as reason for the Russian invasion of Georgia (Hafkin, 2010). The Russian intervention in Georgia progressed past the separatist populated areas and reached the Georgian capital (Hafkin, 2010). Here, similarities can be seen between the Russian intervention in Georgia and the Russian intervention in Crimea. Russia conducts imperialist expansion under the guise of humanitarian intervention. A delayed military response by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allowed Russia to engineer the separation of two pro-Russian regions of northern Georgia (Hafkin, 2010). Similarly, a lack of resistance exhibited by the West, will enable Russia to impose control on Ukraine. According to realist thought, a military intervention by the West is necessary to prevent further Russian incursion under the cover of humanitarian intervention.

Furthermore, the West can supply military aid to the Ukrainian army to combat incursion. Currently, the Ukrainian military is in the process of orchestrating an exit from a period of reorganization, and thus remains weak (Sanders, 2008). A weak national military is incapable of quelling insurgency in the pro-Russian areas of Ukraine. Additionally, weak military capability fails to serve as a deterrence for a formal Russian invasion. The weak Ukrainian military is incentive for Russia to openly invade pro-Russian areas of Ukraine, as such an invasion would result in a quick victory for Russia.

An opposition to arming the Ukrainian military would reference the American military empowerment of minority political groups in Afghanistan, which, following their domestic victory, became staunch opponents of America (Collins, 2013). This unexpected result led to the American invasion of Afghanistan and severe costs on both sides of the conflict (Collins, 2013). However, this opposition is not valid in the situation at hand because the Ukrainian military is commanded by a democratically-elected, legitimate, and majority government (Sanders, 2008). Foreign military aid to the Ukrainian army is therefore unlikely to result in the military backlash characteristic of Afghanistan. Therefore, the West must supply military aid to the Ukrainian army in order to silence insurgency and deter further Russian incursion.

### **A Liberalist Approach to the Crisis in Ukraine**

Given the latest Russian-incited unrest in Ukraine, the West can establish United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions and continue to work towards an incorporation of Ukraine into the EU. The West can establish a UN approved peacekeeping mission to pacify Russian aggression towards Ukraine. One of the primary issues raised by the Russian government is the safety of pro-Russian Ukrainians following the growth of Ukrainian nationalism (McMahon, 2014). The Russian government believes that the pro-Russian Ukrainians in eastern Ukraine will be attacked given their ethnicities and political beliefs (McMahon, 2014). Therefore, peacekeeping missions to Crimea and to the Donbass region will alleviate Russian concerns of ethnic cleansing and ensure the prevention of further internal violence in Ukraine. Naysayers may claim that a military intervention will be more effective in suppressing insurgency and deterring genocide. However, the use of a Western army for direct military intervention may spark accusations that the West is seeking to further personal military interests and make Russia tactically vulnerable. Therefore, an element of neutrality posed by a UN peacekeeping force is essential in the establishment of political stability in the region and prevention of political violence.

An expansion of the EU to include Ukraine will reduce the economic woes of Ukraine and will lead to a reduction in aggressiveness of Russian foreign policy. In 2009, Estonia was plunged into recession, but recovered when accepted into the EU (Development, 2010). An export-driven economy followed, causing a strengthening of the Estonian economy (Georgieva, 2012). Similarly, in Ukraine, strong economic integration with the EU will strengthen trade relations, help Ukraine develop its export economy, and establish long-term economic stability. Additionally, the Russian government is concerned with encroaching Western influence, and this is reflected in the claim that the West incited the ouster of pro-Russian Ukrainian president Yanukovich (Mearsheimer, 2014). Therefore, it is in Russian interests to forge closer ties with its neighbouring nations. Alternatively, Russia moves to destabilize neighbouring states such that Western integration is difficult (Mearsheimer, 2014). An example of this is the Russo-Georgian war as it is believed that the Russian invasion of northern Georgia occurred to prevent the furthering of ties between Georgia and the EU (Hafkin, 2010). As in the case with Georgia, Russia is currently supporting insurgency in pro-Russian regions to prevent EU integration. Therefore, if Ukraine was completely accepted into the EU, incentive to remotely destabilize the government in Kyiv would decrease, and cause the overall political and economic stabilization of the Ukraine.

While both realist and liberalist approaches carry merit, a liberalist approach is most effective in this situation due to Russian fears of Western expansion, the economic instability of Ukraine, and the ethnic divide in Crimea and the Donbass region. Russia is threatened by the expansion of Western influence close to its borders (Mearsheimer, 2014). In order to reduce Russian fears of Western expansion, the acceptance of Ukraine into the EU is a less expensive and more feasible solution compared to a foreign military

intervention. Furthermore, the economic instability of Ukraine is better addressed by improved export-driven trade through EU integration. Finally, the growing ethnic divide in the Ukraine is better controlled by a neutral peacekeeping mission compared to the provision of military aid to the Ukrainian army. It is for these reasons that a liberalist approach is a more feasible and a more effective plan of action.

### **A Constructivist Explanation of Russian Aggression**

Russian decision-making in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is mired by issues of identity and history. Irredentist goals are a major driving force behind Russian foreign policy. This is similar to the German annexation of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. In the case of Germany, Adolf Hitler claimed that his desire to invade the Sudetenland was to reunify the German-speaking people (Press, 2006). Similarly, Russian foreign policy aims to re-unite Russian-speaking peoples. Should eastern Ukraine gain independence, it can join Russia and, in effect, the ethnic Russians on either side of the current Ukrainian border will be reunited and a single Russian identity will be restored.

In addition to this, Russian decision-making is driven by history. Ukraine was formerly a Soviet republic and gained independence in 1992 (Haran, 2013). Nevertheless, Russia sees Ukraine as a close ally indefinitely bound to Russia by historic ties (Haran, 2013). However, Ukrainian foreign policy, under Yushchenko and Poroshenko, is very pro-Western and favours closer integration with the EU (Rennebohm, 2011; Walker & Luhn, 2014). Therefore, Russian actions can be explained through Russian desires to restore Ukraine as a pseudo-satellite state of Russia.

### **Conclusion**

A realist approach by the West to the Russia-Ukraine conflict is characterized by military intervention and military aid. A liberalist approach is defined by peacekeeping missions and inclusion of Ukraine in the EU. Given both possible approaches, the best view is the liberalist one as it assuages Russian fears of hostile Western expansion, repairs the Ukrainian economy, and effectively prevents ethnic cleansing in conflict-prone regions. A constructivist explanation of Russian decision-making reflects a desire to restore a unified Russian identity and the historical ties between Ukraine and Russia.

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