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Backtracking From the Brink in Ukraine

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By Jay Ogilvy

If ever there were a flashpoint — to invoke the title of George Friedman's new book — Ukraine is it. The fragile cease-fire now in place in eastern Ukraine is the pilot light to a new Cold War between the United States and Russia as their proxies poise to reload.

At this critical moment, American media have been fanning the flames of this flashpoint. While Russia has hardly been innocent of violating international law in its annexation of Crimea, it is worth taking stock of some history, near and distant, to temper the narratives that could escalate into

a shooting war that should be entirely avoidable.

Ever since the lead-up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, the American media have been filled with Vladimir Putin bashing. For Americans, Putin is an easy target with his KGB background, bare-chested bravado and anti-gay policies. But this obsessive focus on Putin's personality obscures much more important geopolitical realities.

False Parallels

The dominant U.S. narrative for Ukraine is that Ukraine is simply one more Eastern European country trying to

try itself out from under seven decades of Soviet oppression. This narrative is profoundly misleading. Ukraine is not Poland, and it is not Latvia or Romania. These countries are each largely united by a shared language and culture. They are also further fused through suffering from prior Russian incursions.

Ukraine is different from most of its neighbors in Eastern Europe. It is both deeply divided, culturally and politically, and its eastern half is strongly bound to Russia.

Just look at the maps of the presidential elections of 2004, 2010 and 2014.

UKRAINIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

2004 RESULTS

- Viktor Yushchenko (Western-leaning)
- Viktor Yanukovich (Russian-leaning)

2010 RESULTS

- Yulia Timoshenko (Western-leaning)
- Viktor Yanukovich (Russian-leaning)

Note: In both 2004 and 2010 the regional electoral results divided in the same way, although the percentage was different



2014 RESULTS

After the government of former President Viktor Yanukovich fell, President Petro Poroshenko won across Ukraine but received less than 50% of the vote in many eastern oblasts. Crimea and large parts of Luhansk and Donetsk did not participate.

- Over 50%
- Less than 50%



Source: Washington Post, BBC, Financial Times

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Note the similarity between these electoral maps and the distribution of Russian speakers:

RUSSIAN AS A NATIVE LANGUAGE



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Eastern Ukraine is not equivalent to the former East Germany artificially divided from the whole. "Rus," the identity that is the root of the Russian identity, was born in Ukraine's capital, Kiev, centuries before Moscow's more recent accession to the central role. During the civil war that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917, some of the fiercest fighting over the founding of post-revolutionary Russia took place in Ukraine. Crimea, which was part of Russia until it was ceded to Ukraine after World War II, has long served as Russia's equivalent to Florida — a vacation destination for the elite to escape winter's cold or enjoy summer at the seashore.

In addition to these historical and cultural realities that go back centuries, the U.S. media also ignore more recent history. The Soviet Union gifted Crimea to Ukraine in 1954, shortly after the death of Josef Stalin in 1953. The new leader, Nikita Khrushchev, felt a strong attachment to his favorite province of the Soviet Union. He had worked in a Ukrainian mine as a young man and took a Ukrainian woman as his wife. Shifting Crimea's attachment from Russia to Ukraine was like moving money from his right pocket to his left. Khrushchev could hardly have imagined that his beloved Ukraine would cease to be part of the Soviet Union in less than 40 years.

Moving still closer to the present, an amnesiac American media forgets that, after the fall of the Soviet Union, in the words of the last U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union in a Feb. 20 address at the National Press Club, "first President [George H.W.] Bush, at a Malta meeting in 1989, and then later, in 1990, almost all the Western leaders, told Gorbachev: If you remove your troops from Eastern Europe, if you let Eastern Europe go free, then we will not take advantage of it."

Despite that admittedly controversial "promise" — controversial because it was only verbal and never put in

the form of a written treaty — the United States and NATO have moved steadily eastward toward the Russian border. Never mind juicy details like U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt getting caught on tape discussing the imminent coup of elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. Never mind the dark shadow of anti-Semitism in groups like western Ukraine's nationalist Svoboda party, or the out of control militias responsible for some of the worst of the fighting. There is plenty of blame to go around on both sides of a very messy reality. The important thing is to appreciate that this mess has many hues other than black and white before righteously arming those poor Ukrainians against the vicious Putin.

A Warmer Cold War

Today it is almost hard to recall the warmer relationship between the United States and Russia before and immediately after the fall of the Iron Curtain. As part of a decadeslong effort at citizen diplomacy, I traveled to Russia in 1983, 1985 and 1991. Those were heady days with talk of a "peace dividend" and "a new world order." Our tiny group — Track Two: An Institute for Citizen Diplomacy — numbered fewer than 50 individuals. Nevertheless, we managed to sponsor then-President Boris Yeltsin's first trip to the United States, during which he experienced an epiphany. Faced with dozens of different brands of mustard in a Houston, Texas, supermarket (he loved mustard), he broke down in tears at what 70 years of communism had denied his people. He returned to Russia, quit the Communist Party, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I tell this story to heighten the contradictions between what could have been, what is now and what might yet be. When I returned to Russia again in 2005, feelings were much cooler. I had the opportunity to conduct 28 high-level interviews over a period of 10 days and, time and again, what I heard was a message that said, in effect, "No, we are never going to go back to the old centrally planned economy; we renounce Marx; we embrace the market; but we want to do it our way. You Americans are overbearing and arrogant. Back off!"

What had happened in the intervening years? In retrospect, I would say the United States simply got distracted around the time of the first Gulf War. We took our eye off the Russian ball. Various advisers and consultants confused Russia with Poland and advocated a sudden transition to a market economy. Lacking the requisite institutional infrastructure for managing a fair marketplace, many of Russia's treasures fell prey to asset grabs by the now infamous oligarchs.

When runaway inflation led to the devaluation of the ruble in 1998, millions saw their precious pensions evaporate overnight. Many Russians were not at all happy with their transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. Perhaps the jokes had been true — "All Russians are equal: equally poor" and "We pretend to work; they pretend to pay us." Nonetheless, those pensions had provided something of a safety net, however meager. The new world order was considerably more brutal — economically speaking — than the old regime.

Further, as former President Mikhail Gorbachev has remarked, Americans indulged in what he calls "triumphalism," which was all the easier to do when the Russian economy fell so far down. But as former U.S. Ambassador Jack Matlock argues vigorously in his book *Superpower Illusions*, the United States did not "win" the Cold War. Matlock was there with President Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev when they achieved what both sides regarded as a negotiated settlement that was to the advantage of both nations — at least at first. Only later, when the promise of Russian wealth did not materialize, did that negotiated settlement come to appear to the Russians to be every bit as punitive as the Treaty of Versailles had been to the Germans in the wake of World War I.

The American media, with a few exceptions like Stephen F. Cohen, neglects these geopolitical realities.

Instead it repeats over and over its cartoons of a demon Putin, its tales of unwarranted Russian aggression across Ukraine's eastern border, its sympathy for a nation mistakenly believed to be united in its fear of Russia. But Ukraine is not united. It is riven by wounds that run deep. No winner-take-all solution to its problems is likely to succeed.

What chance is there that Russia will use military force to achieve a winner-take-part solution? An earlier Stratfor [three-part series](#) began by gaming Russia's options via several scenarios; then, in [part two](#), considered possible responses by the West. Part three, [Russia Weighs the Cost](#), wrapped up with the following paragraph:

"The conclusion reached from matching up these scenarios with Moscow's strategic imperatives is that no obvious options stand out. All of the scenarios are logically feasible, though some would come at an incredible cost, few of them actually meet Russia's needs, and none of them can be guaranteed to succeed as long as the possibility of a U.S. or NATO military response remains. If the prospect of such a military engagement deters the West from taking direct action against a Russian offensive, the West's option to subsume the remaining parts of Ukraine significantly minimizes the benefits of any military operation Russia might consider. As Joshua, the computer in the 1983 movie WarGames, observed, 'The only winning move is not to play.'"

This scenario-based analysis reflects a disciplined effort to weigh the options from the perspective of Russian strategists: what is to be gained or lost for Russia, not for a cartoonish Putin.

The point of this column is to overcome the simplistic narrative of Ukraine that has been painted in the U.S. media. If we fail to appreciate Russia's real interests, if we obscure geopolitical realities with glossy dramas about Putin's bare chest, then we are in danger of fanning the flames of old enmities at this critical flashpoint.

Crimea was, is and will be part of Russia. Get used to it. For Donetsk and Luhansk this will also very likely be the case. But Russia (not Putin) has no real interest in advancing more deeply into eastern Ukraine: "The only winning move is not to play." Unless, of course, the West — NATO urged on by the United States — presses needlessly for a winner-take-all solution. In that case many Russians, if not the strategists in the Kremlin, would almost surely be motivated to engage in a "humanitarian intervention" to protect their Russian friends suffering under "oppression" just over the border in eastern Ukraine. In this Western-pressured scenario, there will be blood.

Pressure for a winner-take-all solution by the West would be unreasonable and totally in violation of those verbal assurances made when Reagan and Gorbachev negotiated the conclusion of the Cold War. Such pressure could build upon media-fed delusions about an undivided Ukraine. But a deeper understanding of the geopolitical realities, seen in the context of history, near and far, should give us pause before foolishly giving in to calls to arm the Ukrainians against an unlikely Russian offensive.

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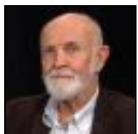
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ARTICLE AUTHOR



Jay Ogilvy

Jay Ogilvy joined Stratfor's editorial board in January 2015. In 1979, he left a post as a professor of philosophy at Yale to join SRI, the former Stanford Research Institute, as director of research. Dr. Ogilvy co-founded the Global Business Network of scenario planners in 1987. He is the former dean and chief academic officer of San Francisco's Presidio Graduate School. Dr. Ogilvy has published nine books, including *Many Dimensional Man*, *Creating Better Futures* and *Living Without a Goal*.

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