**Ukrainian Crisis: How Politics, Geography, and History are Linked in a Contested Territory**

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The Ukrainian crisis is filled with historical resentment. The fact that the former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych rejected a trade deal with the EU and accepted a bailout from Russia instead caused a massive protest in Ukraine. The Ukrainian population saw an agreement with the EU as a potential solution to the country's economic future, which sparked the Crisis. One of its essential characteristics is the ongoing dispute over Crimea. Ukraine makes a set of claims defending why this territory should stay inside its borders, while Russia protests, saying that Crimea should be within Russian territory. Even though hostilities between these nations have been going on for decades, one crucial element that explains present tensions is the Holodomor, a massive Ukrainian famine in the 1930s. Political, as well as historical and geographical factors show that Crimea is a contested territory.

The significant differences between Western and Eastern Ukraine explain their separate ways of thinking. The East identifies more with Russia, whereas the West, with Ukraine. As stated by the *All Ukrainian Population Census 2001[[1]](#footnote-1)*, there are around 46% of Russian speaking population residing in Ukraine, which constitute the majority of the East. This information implies that political decisions that favor Russian beliefs are better accepted in the East, but on the West they would face opposition, and vice-versa. Also, it is worth mentioning that Crimea, a territory that is located on the Eastern part of the country, has around 492.200 people that sympathize with Russia, as found in the census. Therefore, when discussions about Crimea arise, the East would defend Russian interests, but the West would disagree. Therefore, it is clear that Ukraine, even though being a nation, is divided into two different regions, impacting its political decisions.

Political reasons and Crimea’s geographical location are one of the arguments presented by Russia to justify its ownership of the territory. When the Russian Scientific Fund met in Crimea in January of 1992, it was concluded that Crimea is critical for Russia for historical, economic, ethnic, and cultural reasons[[2]](#footnote-2). This information suggests that Russia values Crimea greatly, and that is why they should have control of the territory. Geographically, Crimea is in a strategic position for the Russian Navy[[3]](#footnote-3). As such, the location helped Russia defeat Georgia in the South Ossetia war in 2008, and since then, it remains a key point for Russia (Mortimer, 2014). Additionally, the Russian government is investing and developing, among other things, schools and hospitals because "Crimea is a prestige project for Vladimir Putin"[[4]](#footnote-4). The fact that Russia sees Crimea as crucial, that Crimea is a tactical position for their navy, and that Putin invests in the wellbeing of Crimea’s citizens demonstrates the Russian interests in Crimea.

Shared history links Crimea with Russia. Crimea was a part of Russia since 1783 when the Tsarist Empire annexed the territory after defeating the Ottomans in the Battle of Kozludzha[[5]](#footnote-5). However, in 1954, the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics) transferred Crimea to the UkrSSR (Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic) (Kramer, 2018). This information shows that Russia had Crimea for more than 170 years, validating the “liked history” claim. The shared history aspect is also demonstrated by two important figures of Russia’s politics: the former Russian Vice President Alexander Rutskoi, and the mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak. Rutskoi says that "Crimea must never be allowed to be Ukrainian. Because…it has been Russian land and it is soaked with the blood of our ancestors" (Kuzio, 2017, 115). Sobchak agrees, saying, "Crimea has never belonged to Ukraine" (Kuzio, 2017, 117). Both claims are interesting because they show how relevant Crimea is for Russia. In addition, Crimea has a strong connection with Russia, sharing much of the culture and habits of Russian life[[6]](#footnote-6). For instance, Crimea was "settled and developed mainly by Russians" (Deliagin, 2015, 7), which explains the data presented in the 2001 census. Also, a great quantity of people that reside in Crimea "perceive themselves as people of Russian culture" (Deliagin, 2015, 7), and that Ukrainians never felt that Crimea really belonged to them, not making any efforts to develop the area (Deliagin 2015, 7). It is worth mentioning that as this data is related to Russia's point of view, and as Ukraine's Eastern side (including Crimea) have the majority of the population of Russian descent, these ideas are better viewed in these areas. Although a wide range of arguments were presented, shared history is the most durable bond between Crimea and Russia.

Ukraine is against Crimea’s annexation to Russian territory because of geographical factors. One aspect is the physical connection that Crimea has specifically with Ukraine. As a result, in order to receive resources such as electricity and water, Crimea depends on Ukraine. In addition, Crimean population are struggling to find work opportunities, blaming Russia (Kim, 2018). Also, prices for many products increased because Russia terminated the connections that Crimea had with Ukraine, which created resentment towards Russia (Kim, 2018). These factors are relevant because they show that in order to obtain basic assets Crimea depends mostly on Ukraine, and the fact that the territory belongs to Russia or Ukraine does not change this point. Crimea’s dependency on Ukraine for basic needs, and the resentment towards Russia demonstrates the reasons the significance that Crimea has for Ukraine.

Crimea’s transfer to Ukraine has legal implications. When the Vice President of Russia, Alexander Rutskoi, made a visit to Crimea in April of 1992, he claimed that Crimea should be freed from Ukraine, which shows his patriotic views and the connection that Russia has with Crimea (Kuzio, 2017, 116). A month later, following the Vice President's visit, the Russian Supreme Court (RSP) declared that the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 was “illegal” (Kuzio, 2017, 116), causing mass protests in Ukraine. In response, Ukraine declared that the RSP’s decision was not significant and did not have any consequences for them (Kuzio, 2017, 116). Additionally, Ukraine asserted that they are recognized internationally, including by Russia, as having Crimea in its borders. Therefore, annexing Crimea would change how Ukraine is seen by other nations in the international system. In conclusion, Crimea’s possession has been up to debate for a long time, and the discussions about who is its legitimate owner are much more complicated than they seem on the surface, involving even the law.

Ukraine’s history is filled with resentment towards Russia due to a genocide orchestrated by the Russians. The Holodomor, a famine that stroke Ukraine is considered "one of the most traumatic and significant events in the history of Ukraine"[[7]](#footnote-7). The genocide was the product of decisions taken by the leaders of the Communist Party and the Soviet state, characterizing this massacre as being "man-made" (Б, 2017, 163). Moreover, the famine was used as an “instrument” (Б, 2017, 163) to overpower, oppress, and horrify Ukraine’s citizens. This event can indeed be called a “genocide” because it was used to repress Ukraine's "intellectual figures and political leadership" (Б, 2017, 163). Holodomor had negative effects on Ukraine. First, some of the starving people had no other choice but to commit cannibalism (including carrion) (Б, 2017, 163). Second, "traditional social fabric in the countryside broke down," (Б, 2017, 163), meaning that independent farms were destroyed. Third, vandalism such as theft increased (Б, 2017, 163). Lastly, "the sense of community," and morals went away along with "people's health and well-being" (Б, 2017, 163), killing a great number of people in the process. On average, it is believed that around 3.9 million people died in this event[[8]](#footnote-8). Finally, the Holodomor is a relevant topic because it shows an action done by the Russians to impact Ukraine, which explains the resentment.

Ukrainians see the Holodomor as an important criteria to justify the recent disagreements between them and Russia. Scholars believe that the majority of the Ukrainian population marked the Holodomor as a "historical confirmation"[[9]](#footnote-9) that Russia, in the past but also in the present, feels intimidated by a Ukraine being more "independent, prosperous, and democratic" (Hook, 2018). Moreover, the war between the Ukrainian military and Russian is "rooted in violence including…Holodomor"[[10]](#footnote-10). The war and Famine are part of a series of conflicts that are "deeply" (Werner, 2018) entrenched in history, dating back to 1700s with the Russian empire controlling areas of Ukraine. The actions taken today by Russia in relation to Ukraine are similar to those taken by them back then (Werner, 2018). To illustrate this fact, Werner gives two examples. The first is that Holodomor had the objective to ruin the Ukrainian population in a "man-made famine and Genocide" (2018) similarly to the recent conflict between Russia and Ukraine that also attempts to "negate the sovereignty of Ukraine as a nation" (2018). The second is related to what the U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations, Kurt Volker, said about the dispute. For Volker, this conflict is "not an indigenous conflict in Ukraine… it's the result of Russia invading and occupying territory in Ukraine" (Werner, 2018). In the same speech, Volker claims that "the conflict is driven clearly by Russian forces" (Werner, 2018). As seen, even though the Holodomor happened almost 90 years ago, antipathy towards Russia exist even to this day.

Russia proposed a referendum to decide who should stay with Crimea, which would solve this animosity , but it lacks consistency, and infringes international law. Lea Brilmayer finds three problems with the referendum[[11]](#footnote-11). First, that Putin’s idea is to let the people decide with who they will side with (2014). Second, Russian troops may threaten voters (2014). Third, a referendum goes against Ukraine’s constitution (2014). Last, it violates international law (2014). The first issue is problematic because, as discussed earlier, Crimea has a majority of Russian population, and this fact makes the result of the referendum bias because by its nature they will favor Russian beliefs, since the Russian population in Ukraine would ally with Russia (Brilmayer, 2014). The second issue also makes the result invalid because if Russian troops actually intimidate voters, this will have a direct effect on the authenticity of the outcome (Brilmayer, 2014). Brilmayer claims that in Ukraine’s constitution, “all Ukrainians would have to vote on Crimea’s secession” (2014), not just Crimea’s inhabitants, which goes against Putin’s referendum. In addition, international law claims that whether or not a population of a territory want their territory to be part of another is nonsense because the population’s will to move is simply not enough evidence to justify such an action (Brilmayer, 2014). To illustrate this fact, Brilmayer alludes to Basque, that if only counting the will of its inhabitants, they “should be free from Spain and France” (2014). International law also states certain ways that nations can acquire territory, which are: “discovering uninhabited land, signing a treaty … or occupying an area peacefully over a long period of time” (Brilmayer, 2014). As seen, international law never included a referendum to solve the issue of a contested territory. It is important to note the anarchic reality of the international system gives Putin the power to violate, since there is no ruling organization to stop him. Concluding, even though Putin wanted a resolution for this issue, his plan is not concise and infringes international law, making it nonapplicable.

A viable resolution for the Ukrainian Crisis is much more difficult than it seems. The fact that Ukraine is divided into two different zones makes it difficult for an agreement to be made because each region has a distinct opinion about Crimea’s situation. Political reasons, Crimea’s geographical position, and shared history demonstrate the importance that Crimea has for Russia. Ukraine arguments also include geographical, and historical motives (Holodomor) that shows their bond with Crimea. Holodomor is an important event that demonstrates the historical resentment that Ukraine has for Russia, which impacts their relations to this day. In addition, it reveals the similarities about how Russia acted towards Ukraine, and how they behave nowadays. Hoping that it would put an end to the Crisis, Russia came up with a plan that involved a popular vote, for Crimean’s population to choose which territory they would like to remain with, but the plan showed itself to be unreasonable because it did not take into account international law nor Ukraine’s constitution. As long as Russia and Ukraine continue to trade barbs with each other, Crimea will remain as a contested territory for a long time, and the fact that it may in the future belong to Ukraine or Russia will not invalidate the significances that Crimea has for both nations.

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