



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

Author: Sasha Maksymenko; URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-government\\_protests\\_in\\_Kiev\\_\(13087644205\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-government_protests_in_Kiev_(13087644205).jpg)

## Estonia - The Ukrainian Crisis as Reflected in the Estonian Media

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The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This article focuses on Estonia.

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Tuning into and reading the Estonian media's coverage of the Euromaidan and the later crisis in the Crimea, one inevitably experiences a déjà vu-effect. We've heard it all before during the war in Georgia in 2008: the utter disbelief at Russia's behaviour towards its neighbours mixed with an attitude of "see, the (rest of the) West - we told you so - this is what Putin's Russia is really all about"; relief that Estonia is part of NATO but anxiety about the alliance's actual efficacy in a possible crisis of a similar kind in the Baltic space; an outpouring of solidarity and sympathy with nations that stood on the same starting line as Estonia in 1991, combined with a quiet satisfaction that we got some key things right in our foreign and security policies; disgust at the immensity and crudeness of Russia's information warfare vis-à-vis its victim; and last but not least, disappointment at the slowness and modesty of the EU's diplomatic resolve in a major political and security crisis affecting the balance of power in Europe as a whole.

### For Putin the Cold War is not over

Historical analogies abound - Putin is compared with Hitler, and the recent Russian takeover of the Crimea is likened to Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia in 1938.<sup>[1]</sup> Russia's ongoing hysterical campaign in Ukraine is commonly read through the lens of its alleged chauvinism. The country's identity is seen to stand on the pillars of imperial enlargement and the greatness of the state.<sup>[2]</sup> Russia's behaviour vis-à-vis Ukraine is interpreted, quite simply, as a declaration of war on the West as a whole.<sup>[3]</sup> The media tends to echo the Estonian Government's sentiment that the recent events in Ukraine constitute the greatest political and security crisis in Europe of recent decades. Experts nonetheless diverge on the issue of whether Russia's manoeuvres in the Crimea and the eastern regions of Ukraine are tactical or strategic in nature - that is, whether Russia's aim is simply to hamper Ukraine's closer alignment with the West<sup>[4]</sup>, or rather to restore control over the post-Soviet space as a whole.<sup>[5]</sup>

As a cure to the current crisis, international isolation and extensive sanctions against Russian leaders and oligarchs are being called for in order to induce an economic crisis in Russia.<sup>[6]</sup> More often than not, the EU is accused of political impotence and myopia while hopes for a more vigorous policy response are placed in the United States. It has been argued that Europe is simply "too old, too complacent, too indecisive and too dependent on Russian money to punish Russia in any significant manner"<sup>[7]</sup> for the havoc it has wreaked in Ukraine. Many recognize that the alarming situation in Ukraine is not helped by the unhealthy state of the Ukraine's own military forces, which the crisis caught unawares in the midst of large-scale structural reforms. While Europe is no longer prepared for a conventional war in its geopolitical sphere, and many NATO members continue to have less-than-adequate defence budgets, the crisis in Ukraine is regarded as a major wake-up call about the continuing possibility of conventional warfare in the broader European space.<sup>[8]</sup>

Kaarel Kaas, the editor-in-chief of the Estonian foreign policy monthly *Diplomaatia* and an analyst at the International Centre for Defence Studies in Tallinn has drawn three main conclusions from Russia's intervention in Ukraine and the occupation of the Crimean peninsula - all of which are rather symptomatic of the broader assessment of the crisis in Estonia. Firstly, he concludes that for Putin, the Cold War is not over; furthermore, the whole foreign policy mentality in Russia is currently imbued with the idea of a global antagonism with the West and the struggle over spheres of influence in Europe. Secondly, the crisis in Ukraine demonstrates how for Russia, war and military occupation are a valid instrument in the country's relations with other European states. Indeed, Ukraine follows a pattern, or

sequence, in which the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 could be regarded as the first act. Thirdly, Russia's military capabilities have significantly improved in the past few years. Nonetheless, Kaas doubts that a full-scale war is actually Putin's main aim. He believes, rather, that the Russian leader seeks the territorial amputation of Ukraine and thus the obstruction of its political stabilization process and turn to the West. Other voices, such as Rein Taagepera, the Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the University of Tartu, maintain, however, that "Putin loses the more he wins [...] he can only achieve self-destructive Pyrrhic victories until he lets his dream of a restored empire go and really starts to re-build Russia from the inside."

## Renewed Fears

The implications of the Ukrainian crisis for the Baltic States are a constant worry, as the unfolding of the events in Crimea and eastern regions of Ukraine have renewed fears with regard to the actual validity of NATO's Article 5 guarantee and led to self-critical reflections on the insufficient integration of the local Russian-speaking population.<sup>[9]</sup> Against that backdrop, it has been claimed that "there is no better way to neutralize Putin than to make all residents of Estonia feel good in the country" - and thus to "finally make the integration of the Russian-speaking population into Estonian society a clear political priority."<sup>[10]</sup> Resonating with the pacifying discourse of the Foreign Ministry, there is, however, broad agreement about the incomparability of the Georgian and Ukrainian cases with the situation in the Baltics - due to the latter's membership in the North Atlantic Alliance - even though the intactness of the collective defence guarantee of the alliance has yet to be tested in the battle, so to speak.<sup>[11]</sup> A domestic political dimension was added to the Ukrainian crisis in the Estonian context by the government-orchestrated shift of leadership and power-sharing in the coalition, leading to a change of the coalition government in the country in the midst of the Ukrainian crisis - a movement that constituted a clear security risk in the opinion of some. The local political waters have been further stirred by provocative statements on the alleged illegitimacy of the new Ukrainian government and the galling behaviour (such as a visit to Moscow straight after the "referendum" in the Crimea) of the mayor of Tallinn, Edgar Savisaar.

If there were any illusions left about the new peaceful post-Cold War European order after the August war in Georgia in 2008, they have all been shattered judging by the Estonian media accounts of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. As seen from the northernmost of the three Baltic states, it is, indeed, a grave new world out there.

## Footnotes

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2. Olev Remsu, Krimm kui vahend, Postimees (16 March 2014), retrieved 16 November 2015, URL: <http://arvamus.postimees.ee/2729336/olev-remsu-krimm-kui-vahend>.
3. Juhtkiri: Sõjakuulutus läänele, Eesti Päevaleht (19 March 2014), retrieved 16 November 2015, URL: <http://epl.delfi.ee/news/arvamus/juhtkiri-sojakuulutus-laanele?id=68267681>.
4. As the President's Security Policy Adviser Merle Maigre argued on the prominent foreign-policy radio programme Välismääraja on 2 March 2014, URL: <http://podcast.kuku.ee/2014/03/02/valismaaraja-2014-03-02/>.
5. Podcasts of the programme are available (in the chronological order) at: <http://podcast.kuku.ee/saated/valismaaraja/>.
6. See the statement by the Prime Minister's security adviser Ants Laaneots of 16 March 2014 on Välismääraja, URL: <http://podcast.kuku.ee/2014/03/16/valismaaraja-2014-03-16/>.
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10. Juhtkiri 2014.
11. Andres Herkel, Kommentaar: Eesti pole Ukraina, Ida-Virumaa pole Krimm, Ohtuleht (20 March 2014), retrieved 16 September 2015, URL: [www.ohtuleht.ee/568895/kommentaar-eesti-pole-ukraina-ida-virumaa-pole-krimm](http://www.ohtuleht.ee/568895/kommentaar-eesti-pole-ukraina-ida-virumaa-pole-krimm); Urmas Klaas: hüsteeriaga riiki ei kaitse, Postimees (18 March 2014), retrieved 16 September 2015, URL: [arvamus.postimees.ee/2731602/urmas-klaas-husteeriaga-riiki-ei-kaitse](http://arvamus.postimees.ee/2731602/urmas-klaas-husteeriaga-riiki-ei-kaitse).

