



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

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Romania - The Scramble for the Present: Making Sense of the Crisis in Ukraine

Bogdan C. Iacob

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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 Romania.

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Romania - The Scramble for the Present: Making Sense of the Crisis in Ukraine

In Romania, politicians, public intellectuals, and journalists are scrambling to comprehend the crisis faced by their neighbor. They are struggling to figure out the implications of the turmoil east of the border on the country's internal dynamics and international position. They aim to anticipate future developments in the context of rapidly changing strategic realities and a new East-West divide in Europe. The present article attempts to summarize the main topics discussed in Romania over the past month, focusing on newspapers, journals, and online platforms (i.e. more complex blogs, where experts, intellectuals, journalists, etc. write op-eds).

I identified six broad themes in this sample of the public sphere. All of them are interconnected and are inseparably linked to domestic developments. I would argue that the overarching question that links all six themes is how the events in and around Ukraine are relevant for the fate of Romania under conditions of heightened international instability. The themes are:

- 1) Historical emplotments of the situation in Ukraine (i.e. comparisons with the past);
- 2) Subsequent symbolic geographies;
- 3) Images of Russia and Putin;
- 4) The role of the West (EU, USA, NATO), with critiques of capitalism as a corollary;
- 5) Regional re-alignments and visions of neighborliness (including developments in the Republic of Moldova);
- 6) Perceptions of Ukraine.

I should point out that after Viktor Yanukovich fled Ukraine and a transitional government was installed at the end of February, the number of articles about Ukraine itself decreased as compared with the period of the Euromaidan protests. [It seems however that this phenomenon was only temporary, maybe a reflection of the lull between the annexation of Crimea and the recent spike of violence brought about by the Ukrainian state security intervention against the armed pro-Russia insurgents.] Since then, there has been a steady and detailed news flow about Ukraine. Op-eds, though, are currently using the crisis as a springboard for examining issues relevant to Romania. The bulk of the texts about Ukrainian domestic realities and/or historical legacies appeared in the period from January until early March. In the past week or so, at the end of April, there was a surge of articles about the domestic situation in Ukraine, including correspondences from the Eastern part where the fighting greatly intensified. Despite of this new shift in media coverage, the dominant themes identified above remain constant.

Returning to my sources, I used mainly two newspapers. The first is [Adevărul](#), which could be labeled 'centrist.' However, it is actually an amalgam, since it hosts a blog section where individuals of all political colors publish and a historical magazine that often adopts nationalistic positions. The second is [România Liberă](#), which is center-right. I also browsed through a third newspaper, [Gândul](#), a populist media outlet. The three newspapers arguably have the largest audience. I chose to examine two leading cultural magazines. The first is [22](#), which is center-right. It brings together intellectuals close to the Group of Social Dialogue - a civic institution that played an important role in post-1989 public skirmishes on issues such as democratization, de-communization, re-visiting historical and cultural canons, etc. The second is [Observator Cultural](#), which is center-left. I was forced to exclude a third cultural magazine,

[Dilema Veche](#), because its online edition requires subscription.

The blogs that I surveyed are [Contributors.ro](#) (maybe the most heterogeneous of them - its articles reflect the entire democratic political spectrum), [Voxpublica.realitatea.net](#) (center-left, sustained by one of the most influential news TV stations, Realitatea), [Lapunkt.ro](#) (a liberal cultural e-magazine), and [Criticatac.ro](#) (the platform of the New Left in Romania). [Contributors.ro](#) is supported by an important news agency, [Hotnews.ro](#) (center-right). All these outlets promote authors from Moldova (e.g., Vitalie Ciobanu and Octavian Milewski in 22; Dan Nicu and Igor Cașu in Adevărul; or Vitalie Sprânceană in Criticatac.ro).

Historical emplotments of the situation in Ukraine

Paradoxically, the most pertinent statement about the importance, in Romania, of historical emplotments and symbolic positioning in relation to the crisis in Ukraine was made by Jim Rosapepe, former US ambassador in Bucharest (1998-2001). The former American official argued that "what we consider a low risk of turmoil in Europe is an existential threat to them [the Romanians, B.I.]."^[1] Indeed, it is not surprising that the events in Ukraine brought forth images of Tsarism,^[2] Sovietization,^[3] and the Cold War, some more detailed and pertinent than others. They were all imbued with traumatic motifs of Romania's twentieth-century history. A majority of authors perceive Vladimir Putin's regime as the heir to both the tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union. The situation in Ukraine has prompted different historical comparisons. Some see it as a potential second Crimean war^[4] or the fulfillment of Peter the Great's so-called testament.^[5] Others compare it to the Soviet invasion in Hungary and Czechoslovakia^[6] or see parallels between Ukraine and Afghanistan (i.e. the trigger for the Soviet collapse, thus boding Putin's demise^[7] or as potential turning point in American foreign policy in a comparison of the Carter and Obama administrations).^[8] Pro-Russian demonstrators and militias in Crimea and the Donetsk region are juxtaposed with NKVD-led revolts at the eastern borders of interwar Romania.^[9] Putin's anti-Western attitude is compared to the Com in form's 'two-camp' theory in 1948.^[10] Ukraine itself is examined as a possible example of Finlandization, which is either painted in positive terms^[11] or seen as a step towards the obliteration of the state.^[12] Critics of perceived Western tolerance or hesitancy in the face of Russian aggression bring forth accusations of collaboration and appeasement. For instance, one author rather stridently put an equal sign between EU and US economic interests in Russia and the involvement of Ford and General Motors in pre-Second World War Nazi Germany.^[13] Another more general criticism of the West likens the pacifist positions in the EU and the US with policies of appeasement reminiscent of 1938.^[14]

Romanian commentators often use history to reinforce an image of the country as an 'eternal victim.' The country's former position on the periphery of empires often generates condescending critiques of the West, which is cast in the role of the permanent dupe to a revisionist Russia (with its Soviet personae).^[15] The crisis in Ukraine legitimizes the bi-polar readings of contemporary geopolitical dynamics - of a dictatorial East versus a democratic West. Such narratives elide the complexities of developments in Ukraine, Russia, and in EU and NATO member states.

Geography: Symbols and Geopolitics

Not surprisingly, a zero-sum symbolic geography predominates. Vladimir Putin's regime and, more generally, Russia are portrayed as "the counter model,"^[16] a Leviathan of extremism and autocracy,^[17]

which seeks to do away with Europeanization and Romania's 'return to Europe.' This second theme is handled in a more nuanced way. The West itself is not perceived en bloc. Distinctions are made between the positions of the EU and those of the US. Within the EU, commentators identify three camps: the countries perceived as appeasing toward Putin (France, Holland, or Bulgaria and Greece), Germany's special position, and the states that successfully formulated strategic policies in the aftermath of the Euromaidan and of the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Bulgaria and Greece, along with Serbia and Recep Erodgan's neo-authoritarian regime in Turkey, are seen as possibly weakening EU coherence at its borderlands.^[18] The Balkans are described as a soft underbelly of Euro-Atlanticism, which is exacerbated by China's economic and political interests in the former socialist bloc.^[19] Germany takes on an odd role in analyses of the EU's position mainly because of a perceived ambivalence: on the one hand, it is labeled as the reluctant hegemon of Europe; on the other hand, the economic interests in Russia purportedly recommend her as appeaser. There are repeated references to Central Europe as a buffer zone and the historical imperial territory between Germany and Russia.^[20] Some authors interpret the German hesitancy to impose harsher economic sanctions against Russia as sign of an impending German-Russian neo-imperialist tradeoff.^[21] Others read German decision-making from the point of view of a European hegemon biding its time in order to avoid both an escalation of violence and a crippling economic crisis in the EU.^[22]

The examination of EU and US positions with regard to Putin's aggression has prompted questions about the tasks at hand for Romanian diplomacy. Poland is depicted as having successfully mediated between the EU and Ukraine.^[23] One journalist from 22 underlines that "Poland and the Baltic countries are the engines of a shift in the regional balance of power."^[24] Another stresses the need for a renewal of the Polish-Romanian strategic partnership in NATO and the EU. Poland and Romania also appear to have anticipated the present crisis, as "they tried to convince their partners [at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008] to grant Ukraine and Georgia M.A.P. [Membership Action Plan, B.I.],"^[25] only to have their initiative rejected by France and Germany. Commentators thus suggest that Romania should join Poland in lobbying for pro-active, forceful revisions of NATO defensive plans and policies toward Russia.

The interpretation of Romania's role in NATO and its relationship with its neighbors is inextricably tied to readings of the United States' role as superpower. Several authors criticize the Obama administration for its perceived "neo-isolationism." American re-engagement in East Central Europe is considered vital to stopping Putin's offensive in Ukraine and in the region.^[26] Such renewed involvement is also seen as the key ingredient in re-establishing a putative lost coherence of the West in the face of aggression from the East.^[27] In texts that strongly emphasize the return of a polarity between East and West, the US appears as a sort of providential 'benevolent superpower.'^[28]

Images of Russia and Putin's persona

The "world of Putin"^[29] is seen as the antithesis of the democratic EU. Russia is described as a country synonymous with unfreedom, which is led by Putin, the autocratic heir to both the Soviet Union and the Romanovs. Several commentators refer to Russian messianism, the ideology of Eurasianism, and the political extremism advocated by the Putin regime.^[30] There is very little analysis of the multifaceted nature of decision-making in Moscow. Furthermore, very few authors examine the prospects of the anti-Putin democratic opposition. Paradoxically, there is some agreement that Putin's reaction to the Euromaidan and his intervention in Crimea were also motivated by a fear of democratic 'contagion.'

Descriptions of Putin's persona fall into two categories. The first sees in him the all-out personification of brute imperial power, which simply emasculates its Western, wavering counterparts.^[31] Such a description stems from a focus on the 'Russian danger' - the more ominous its leader, the more perilous non-containment is. The pitfall of this view is that it also functions as an inverted cult of personality and a barely veiled critique of Occidental decline. The second category is based on careful investigation of the leader's biography and his road to power. Emphasis is placed on his time in the KGB, his machismo, and his authoritarian personality, homophobia, nationalism, pro-Sovietism, etc.^[32] The ties of Putin's regime to extremist or ultra-conservative parties in the EU only reinforce the perception that this leader is the epitome of the global anti-democratic champion.^[33]

Certain contributors depart from these patterns of analyzing Russia and Putin. A number of commentators insightfully point to the Eurocentricity of the crisis in Ukraine, invoking China as the true superpower challenger. They also underline the potential for internal (economic) crisis in Russia to an inevitable imperial overstretch.^[34] Commentators associated with the Romanian New Left tend to present Putin as the most extreme form of neo-liberalism. Despite acquiescing en passant with his dictatorial policies, their critiques are in fact anti-EU and anti-capitalist. They argue that Putin's aggression is similar to a so-called 'EU colonialism'; that his regime's propaganda is identical to Western critiques; and that pro-Russian protests should not be seen as less relevant than the Euromaidan. In their view, in both Ukraine and Romania, the EU and Putin represent the same choice: colonialism triggered by brute force and neoliberalism.^[35] Or, to paraphrase one such shrill reading, there is no difference between Romania and Uzbekistan along a purported East-West imperialist axis.^[36]

Borders, Neighbors and Revisionism

Descriptions of the situation in Ukraine and its possible impact on Moldova reinforce the perception of a huge political, cultural, historical, and economic cleavage between East and West. In the past month, less attention has been paid to the complex identity issues in Ukraine. Even when authors do address regional, confessional, linguistic, and political differences in Ukraine, they tend to exaggerate them as symptoms of the country's historical legacies, which seemingly cannot be overcome.^[37] More insightful analysts empathize with the Ukraine's borderland status between East and West, without relegating it to an eternal in-betweenness. Ukraine and Moldova are faced with the challenge of Europeanization, which, according to several authors, does not necessarily mean EU accession, but rather the rule of law, accountability, civil rights, etc.^[38]

The referendum in Crimea invites analyses of "the danger of revisionism" in Europe. Revisionism via referenda is seen as a phenomenon that destabilizes the continental order.^[39] Comparisons of Crimea and Kosovo are dismissed with reference to the humanitarian motivations of the latter case as opposed to the Russocentric and expansionist reasons behind the former.^[40] However, the Kosovo precedent has given rise to the well-worn stereotype of the "Balkanization of Europe."^[41] It is nevertheless surprising that the two cases are rarely juxtaposed. This might be because Kosovo's independence was not recognized by Romania and there was no great public support for NATO intervention in 1999.

Right-wing commentators see the events in Ukraine and the danger posed by Russia as a pretext for the accelerated unification of Moldova and Romania, especially if Transnistria becomes part of the Russian Federation.^[42] Commentators from Moldova itself warn that an overemphasis on unification in Romania rather than on Moldova's European integration will further destabilize their country. Things could take even an uglier turn if the communist party wins the general elections planned for the fall.^[43] Revisionism

is seen as a double-edged sword, especially if Hungarian politicians' attitudes to their countrymen in Transylvania are taken into account.^[44] Romania's own revisionism with regard to Moldova mirrors similar positions adopted by either Viktor Orbán's government or by Jobbik. At least two commentators underline the failure of the Romanian government to create inclusive frameworks for (young) Hungarians living in the country, thus opening the door to extremism.^[45] One of the most interesting contributions to the discussion of neighborly relations is a policydraft that stresses the importance of strengthening trans-frontier cooperation and minority-related dialogue between Romania, Ukraine, and Moldova.^[46]

One issue that is highly pertinent in the Romanian context is the impact of Putin's aggression in Ukraine on Romania's (and the EU's) energy policies. This is a highly divisive domestic topic. In 2013, there were widespread protests in Romania against the extraction of shale gas by means of fracking. They ballooned into anti-government and anti-establishment demonstrations. Some commentators (especially those associated with Criticatac.ro) expect that fracking will become more acceptable in this context in spite of the environmental dangers it poses. This would also signal the further de-democratization of the country.^[47] Others point to the necessity of finding alternative energy solutions for Romania, in particular further access to Azeri oil resources.^[48]

Conclusion

The six major themes of the Romanian debates triggered by the crisis in Ukraine invite two conclusions. On the one hand, the almost zero-sum vision of an East-West divide imposes a sense of political and symbolic urgency, which often obscures the complexity of the problems Europe, Ukraine, Eastern Europe, Russia or even Romania face. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore several interventions that stress the difference between multilateralism and peaceful conflict resolution, and *realpolitik*, that is, power-politics readings of the present international conundrum. On the other hand, calls for pro-active, interventionist anti-Putin positions, either from Romanian officials or from the EU and the US, sometimes obfuscate an increasing tendency toward more self-reflective and self-critical discourses. These link the perils in Ukraine to calls for further democratization and reform in the Romania.^[49] The crisis east of the border coincided to a large degree with the deepening of the political divide in Romania. The social-liberal coalition collapsed at the end of February. The conflict between the prime minister and the president escalated as the cohabitation pact was suspended. And, most importantly, local political parties are shaken on a daily basis by corruption indictments and trials.

The situation in Ukraine is often perceived as anonymous lesson about the vulnerability of a divided, highly corrupt, unreformed political system with the specter of a revisionist Russian regime drawing nearer to Romania's frontiers. It remains to be seen if this seventh theme of domestic democratic weakness/deficit will become more prominent and radical in the public sphere, especially if the situation in eastern Ukraine takes a turn for the worse.

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