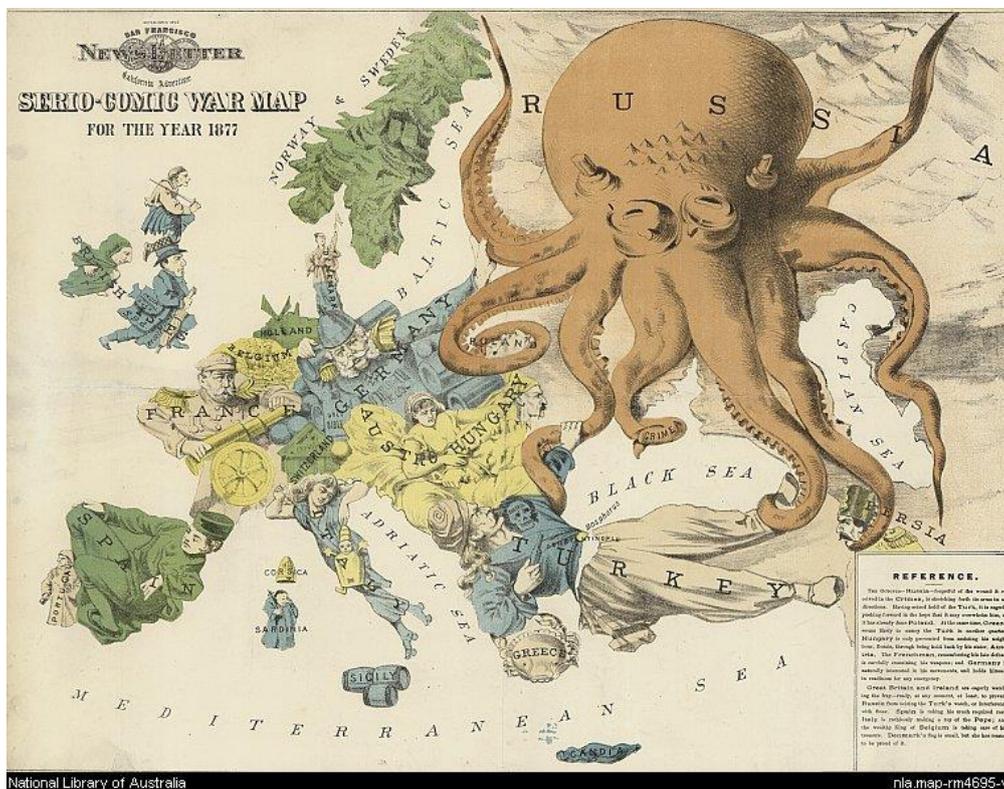


Koinova, Maria 2014 [“The Ukrainian Crisis and Ethnonationalist Conflict in Postcommunist States”](#) *Politics Reconsidered Blog, University of Warwick*, May 12.

[Dr Maria Koinova](#) discusses how findings from her book, [“Ethnonationalist Conflict in Postcommunist States”](#), can be applied to current events in Ukraine.

In March and April I presented my recently published book [“Ethnonationalist Conflict in Postcommunist States”](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013) at numerous academic institutions in Europe and the United States. In the book I discuss the informal institutionalisation of conflict dynamics over a 20 year period, and build on empirical evidence from Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Kosovo after the end of the Cold War. Scholars, students and practitioners repeatedly asked me how the book’s findings – which affect the postcommunist world more broadly – relate to the escalating events in Ukraine, and what is my take on the crisis more generally. Here, I share some of these thoughts.



The current Ukrainian crisis is at a critical juncture. This may sound obvious, since the status quo between Ukraine, Europe, the US, and Russia was drastically disrupted after the November 2013 Euromaidan protests and Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 via an illegal referendum. Following another referendum on independence, this time initiated by pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine on May 11, 2014, Russia and the West are experiencing their worst crisis since the end of the Cold War. But driven by the immediacy of events and aiming to stop the violence, conflict analysts often overlook issues with long-term effects that are anchored in such formative periods. Below, I outline some of the long term effects of previous crises and discuss how actions now could prevent similar outcomes in the current situation.

First, the conflict is not only about “them” – the Ukrainian majority, the Russian

minority, and Russia as an aggressive kin-state. Policy makers in Western capitals usually think of themselves as those who have to manage such conflicts, but rarely factor in that what they do, or do not do, how quickly and how slowly they do it, and in what sequence they do it with regard to other events. But they should be aware that international actors become endogenised in such conflicts when they are formed. After such critical periods end, international actors need to put much more political and financial effort into resolving such conflicts.

Let me give you some examples. In my book I show how the international community was highly vigilant about human rights abuses in Bulgaria towards the end of the communist era. In 1989 the outgoing communist regime inaugurated a swift assimilation and expulsion campaign of Turks from Bulgaria towards Turkey. But the international community made numerous diplomatic and institutional efforts to reverse the course of events, gave Bulgaria opportunities for long-term relationships with Euro-Atlantic economic and political processes, and so paved the way for more peaceful inter-ethnic relationships on the long run. By contrast, international organisations such as the European Community and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe at the time, and powerful states such as the US, were much less vigilant about constitutional changes that took place in Kosovo and Macedonia. In Kosovo the Serbian regime abolished the autonomy of Kosovo Albanians, but international efforts to deal with the crisis were ad hoc and minimal. The constitutional changes which slightly diminished the status of the Albanians of Macedonia went almost unnoticed in Western capitals. International efforts were sporadic and arrived too late, and so contributed to more conflicted relationships over time.

Direct parallels with the Ukrainian crisis are not appropriate here. But it is important to reflect on issues of timing and pace. Russia's sweeping annexation of Crimea has almost presented policy makers with a *fait accompli* regarding the occupation of another country's territory. Marred by lingering economic crisis, centrifugal tendencies, and often indecision, the international community has lagged behind the course of events. In the face of Russia's aggressive stance, slow international responses, coupled with a militarily weak Ukrainian government and aspirations of independence by pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine, have paved the way for the emergence of what conflict scholars call "security dilemmas." There is a growing fear among some Ukrainians (and Russians) that there is nobody to protect them, and that a possible course of action could be self-defence. As discussions at the Association for the Study of Nationalities in New York identified in late April 2014, the nationalist, anti-Western, and anti-Russian Ukrainian party Right Sector has gathered more followers recently, even among those who do not believe in their cause, but who lack alternatives.

Second, polarisation is on the rise, especially after the occupation of buildings by pro-Russian supporters in Eastern Ukraine, anti-insurgency measures launched by the Ukrainian government, and killings of pro-Russian supporters gathered in a building in Odessa on May 2, 2014. There is fear that Ukraine is on the brink of a civil war, especially after the independence referendum in two cities in Eastern Ukraine on May 11, 2014, and the fact that this referendum was already declared illegal by Germany and France. Furthermore, there is more Russian military build-up on the Ukrainian border. Conflict analysis shows that once polarisation takes place, reversing the course of conflict is more difficult to achieve, even if peace agreements

and institutional arrangements bring an end to the conflict. To return to analogies from my book, swift polarisation between the Serbian government and Kosovo Albanians in 1989-1991 brought about secessionist demands and enduring Kosovo parallel structures which could not be reversed. NATO's 1999 military intervention in Kosovo also greatly polarised the Albanian and Macedonian communities in neighbouring Macedonia, and indirectly paved the way for escalation of the conflict to a brief internal war in 2001. Institutional structures in the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001) managed to stop the violence in Macedonia, but the Albanian and Macedonian communities have lived quite separated ever since, and definitely more separated than before this polarisation occurred in 1999.

My concluding remarks do not aim to give a direct advice to policy makers. The Ukrainian situation is different to others, but some parallels exist and are worth considering. Economic sanctions alone risk outcomes resembling the highly problematic pressure exerted on the Serbian regime of Milosevic during the wars of disintegration of former Yugoslavia. Sanctions created grounds for the flourishing of smuggling and the war economy in the Balkans, but did not displace Milosevic from power. In the Ukrainian situation, diplomacy needs to be further applied, but – like the sanctions – may not be as applicable alone to a regime growing in its aggressiveness. Thwarting the spread of insurgencies on the ground should be a priority to prevent further polarisation and a resort to self-defence. Policies in western capitals also need to be further unified to project a clear signal of united power vis-à-vis separatists and an antagonistic Russian regime.



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