

Alongside Russian interference, the conflict in eastern Ukraine is also the result of serious mistakes by Kyiv and the West

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28/04/2014

*A number of commentators have focused on the role of Russia in the crisis in eastern Ukraine. **Javier Morales** and **Rubén Ruiz Ramas** argue, however, that the actions of the West and the interim Ukrainian government have also significantly contributed to the crisis. They write that the danger of the crisis spilling over into war is very real and would damage the interests of all parties.*



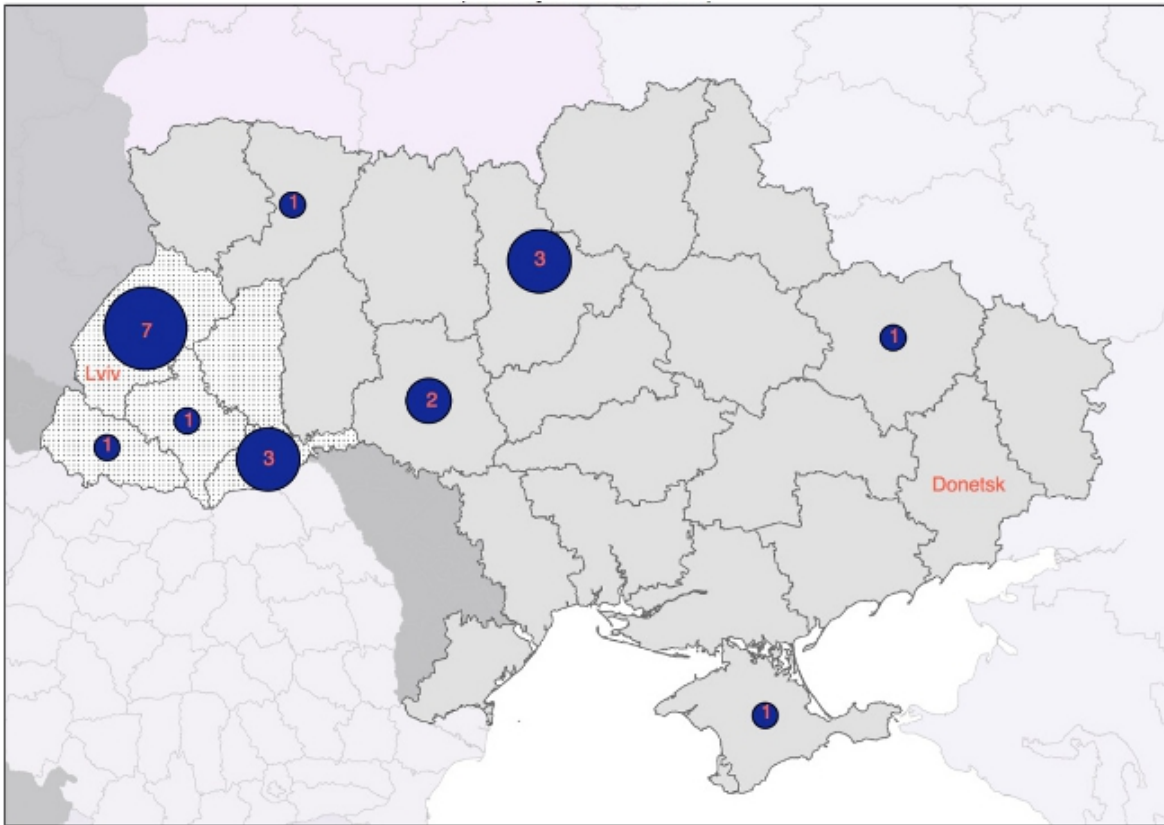
The regional cleavage in Ukraine is not a myth, as many analysts still insist. It is clearly reflected in surveys on the support for the **Euromaidan** at the **beginning** of the protests, but also on its **end**, on the interim government's **legitimacy**, integration into **NATO**, and finally on association with the EU, if that would mean moving apart from Russia. On all these issues regional disparity reaches 40-50 per cent. Consequently, those of us who have been **warning** against the centrifugal effects that the revolution in Kyiv would produce are neither surprised by the rebellion in eastern Ukraine, nor willing to understand it as just the result of a conflict with external powers.



However, this crisis is not a by-product of the complex historical process of Ukrainian state-building either; decisions by the main actors (internal and external) in this crisis have been equally relevant. **Yanukovych**, the EU and **Russia** have an undeniable responsibility for the crisis, but the current situation of 'multiple sovereignty' has been caused by three key elements: the interim government's decisions, which have contributed to the social polarisation of the country; the opening of a political opportunity structure for the pro-Russian rebels in the East after Crimea was annexed by Russia; and the state's weakness, which makes it very difficult to neutralise the challenge posed by armed groups.

Among the failures in the interim government's decisions, we can pinpoint two 'original sins' and three later mistakes that were also far from inconsequential. First, the opposition leaders broke the February 21st **agreement** that was negotiated with mediators from the EU and Russia, immediately taking power once the president fled to the East of the country. Second, instead of the 'national unity' interim government they had agreed to, they appointed a new cabinet which **excluded** the regions that did not support them, as had happened under Yanukovych. This is clearly shown in the Chart below.

Chart: Number of minister-level appointments by region of origin in the Yatsenyuk government



Source: Foreign Affairs

Three other decisions were also misguided, even considering the difficult situation after Crimea's illegal and illegitimate annexation. The law recognising Russian as a co-official language in the regions where it is used by the majority was abolished, although it was later reinstated. Second, two oligarchs and former 'Orange' supporters became regional governors of Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk. This angered eastern citizens, already fed up with the excessive influence of local businessmen in politics; and also worried those oligarchs affiliated with the Party of Regions. Moreover, Kyiv signed the political part of its Association Agreement with the EU, as well as the bailout deal with the IMF, without considering widespread fears among entrepreneurs and the working class about the negative effects for industrial and mining sectors.

In addition to eastern and southern Ukrainians' feelings of being excluded from central institutions, four factors related to Crimea provided them with a political opportunity to defy the new authorities. First, they perceived that Kyiv and the West on one side, and Russia on the other, had implicitly agreed to exchange the peninsula for control over the rest of Ukraine. Second, the new strategy used in Crimea (small armed groups [seizing](#) government buildings) showed that mass demonstrations incorporating tens of thousands of protesters were unnecessary. Third, Kyiv's authority appeared notably weak and the security forces looked deeply divided. Finally, the new electorate, without Crimean voters, has made it almost impossible for the Russian-speaking regions to win another presidential election in the future. Therefore, any such movement needed to take place before the planned 25 May election: for the rebels, it was now or never.

Failure by the state to effectively respond to a direct threat to its sovereignty has become evident in the disloyal behaviour of the local bureaucracy, army and law enforcement officers, many of which have refused to follow orders from Kyiv or even defected to the rebels. Disaffection for the central government and regional polarisation should be measured by this lack of mobilisation against the separatist challenge, not by the mobilisation of a limited number of pro-Russian protesters.

Meanwhile the United States and the EU are pursuing three partially incompatible objectives: keeping the pro-Western interim government in power, preventing a war, and countering Russia's own strategy. The West is also paying for its own 'original sin' in accepting the opposition's unilateral takeover, in breach of the 21 February agreement, as an opportunity to consolidate a pro-European (and pro-trade liberalisation) course. Neither Washington nor Brussels demanded that the Russian language's status was not changed, protested against the appointment of Svoboda's xenophobic nationalists to top government positions, or advised that the new cabinet should include representatives of the eastern regions (which had overwhelmingly voted for Yanukovych, a native of the Donetsk *oblast* himself).

The 17 April [Geneva declaration](#) was only aimed at de-escalation on the ground; no agreement was made on a long-term solution, apart from a "broad national dialogue" on constitutional reform. Kyiv has [agreed](#) to grant a certain level of autonomy to the regions, but opposes a federal system because that could also facilitate Russian influence. However, after the Maidan ousted Yanukovych and Crimea's annexation made it very unlikely for any eastern candidate to become president, a highly decentralised state is the only way to reassure the Russian-speaking regions.

Another disagreement concerns the rebels' refusal to disarm: they argue that the interim government is illegitimate, armed groups on the opposite side (like the fascist movement Right Sector) have not been disbanded, and that central Kyiv is still occupied by protesters after the revolution. The interim government has been taking steps such as [removing barricades](#) from the Maidan or distancing themselves from Right Sector, which is becoming a [dangerous threat](#) to their own authority.

Finally, Kyiv's propaganda (repeated by [some Western media](#)) has identified the rebels as equivalent to the *incognito* Russian soldiers that occupied Crimea; however, [it has been proven](#) that they are a diverse group including local pro-Russian nationalists, war veterans, former Berkut riot police officers, and volunteer fighters from other post-Soviet states (including Cossacks). No doubt Moscow is helping them through intelligence agents on the ground, as well as facilitating travel to Ukraine by 'war tourists'. However, it is clear that the militias enjoy a considerable amount of [local support](#) and most of their members are Ukrainian citizens.

Three main scenarios could develop in the short term. The first is a civil war, to which the government and the militias unfortunately seem to be edging closer toward after several incidents left victims on both sides. However, as Kyiv's previous attempted military operation showed, soldiers [might refuse to fire](#) against the civilians that are shielding the rebel fighters. Regaining control over these regions by force would cost many human lives. On the other hand, the expected response by the overwhelmingly superior Russian army could deter Kyiv from launching a full-scale attack, unless they had no other political option and counted on Western (probably indirect) military assistance.

The second scenario would involve Russia's occupation of the East, which (unlike ethnic Russians in Crimea) many Russian-speaking Ukrainians would not welcome. Putin seems more cautious in this case; he probably realises the negative impact of Crimea's annexation for his own country. However, the militias seem to hope that Moscow will send troops if they suffer enough casualties, which obviously creates a perverse incentive. Such an intervention would probably secure those territories while negotiating their future status; but organising a separatist referendum would be problematic, considering that many locals want to remain part of (a decentralised) Ukraine. If dialogue failed, this would become another 'frozen conflict' like South Ossetia or Abkhazia before 2008.

While the West and Russia do not want to back off, they are not really willing to risk an escalation either. Aside from gestures such as [Washington](#) or [Moscow's](#) military deployments, war would be the worst scenario: it would destabilise the whole region, send thousands of refugees to the EU and Russia, and greatly damage their economic interests. Eastern Ukrainian oligarchs, for the same reasons, want concessions from Kyiv but will also use all their influence to prevent an armed confrontation. An agreement seems to be the only rational option, although at this point many Ukrainians on both sides are driven by nationalist feelings rather than cost-benefit calculations.

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