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### The Ukrainian Future (?)

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*erica colston*

Four years ago in mid-February, Ukrainians took to the streets of Kiev to protest the government led by President Viktor Yanukovich, a figure largely perceived as corrupt and sympathetic to Russia. Bloodied protesters faced off riot police officers armed with water cannons and tear gas as what had begun as a peaceful movement turned into violent chaos. When the state's encroachment on the protesters' occupation of Independence Square seemed imminent, protesters even went so far as to ignite a wall of fire around the square in a desperate act of self-preservation. Their actions lent their revolution a name — Euromaidan, a reference to both the location of the movement's climax and the way of life Ukrainians were looking toward.

A month later, pro-Russian forces in Crimea enabled Vladimir Putin's annexation of the peninsula. Putin justified the land-grab as protecting Russians in former Soviet territories — now minorities threatened by isolation from their mother country — and reuniting a nation fragmented by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Separatists soon after took advantage of Ukraine's weakened political strength in the wake of its loss and overthrew the government in eastern Ukraine, sparking a devastating conflict mired in cultural tension.

Considering Putin has, once again, overwhelmingly "won" the presidential election, Ukraine's prospects seem especially reduced. So far, the conflict between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine has claimed the lives of tens of thousands despite several attempts to broker peace. Over one million Ukrainians have been displaced by the violence, creating a crisis of national confidence.

In particular, young Ukrainians with post-secondary education have been pushed out of the region and Ukraine as a whole, no longer believing (if they ever had the optimism) their splintered country can provide a fulfilling life.

As this “brain drain” witnesses the migration of Ukrainians away from the conflict, other flows reflect both its causes and consequences. These include the withdrawal of industries and economic opportunities, the influx of weapons from Russia in support of the separatist movement, and stark ethnic divides that endure from the era of Soviet Russian migration. In response to the lack of academic and economic opportunities, educated Ukrainians feel forced to migrate either within Ukraine or without entirely in search of a better life.

Political reasons are perhaps the most direct cause of the brain drain from eastern Ukraine — the foremost simply being the threat of warfare between the government and separatists. Most days are characterized by an unrelenting combination of noises from sniper rifles, grenade launchers, and machine guns. Citizens are forced to seek shelter from artillery shells in their ordinary homes, which offer pitifully scant protection.

While some Ukrainians fled the war in eastern Ukraine because of disagreement with the separatists, the majority abandoned their homes out of simple fear, as their daily lives became engulfed in an increasingly lethal conflict between political powers. Moreover, this migration is characterized by a particular generational divide. For educated, young Ukrainians — differing from their parents as products of digitalized (and Westernized) age — there are less personal ties to the region to justify a life of constant strife backed by an anti-Western, foreign power.

Another political cause of the brain drain can be found in the Ukrainian government. As Ukraine lags behind in scientific research in comparison to similarly populated and developed countries, many argue the reason is due to chronic underfunding. According to Nataliya Shulga, the Executive Director of an NGO promoting Ukrainian science, Ukraine has “lost over 20,000 young, motivated researchers, which left the country. This is a loss that is equal to the amount of researchers who are still left in the Academy of Science.”

The educated young of Ukraine are thus fleeing violence and political instability caused by an invasive foreign power, on top of their own government’s prioritization of the war over academia, causing researchers to retreat from Ukrainian institutions. The economy as it affects this migration also comes into play.

Prior to the war, eastern Ukraine witnessed a booming information technology industry that stood in stark contrast to the rest of its weakened economy. However, the conflict has prompted employers in the tech industry to abandon Donetsk, a city and region where the industry was beginning to take off, and take their educated employees with them. Not only did they leave for safety’s sake, but because there’s little economic

sense in it. After all, why stay when the market has shifted to bare necessities and has little room for the luxury of tech?

An example of the war's effect on international employer's is DataArt — a New York software company which chose the city of Lviv in western Ukraine as a new office location rather than risk their employees' well-being by choosing somewhere in the east. Educated professionals are moving to follow the migration of economic opportunity within Ukraine.

The conflict has also furthered a national dearth of economic opportunity in addition to its regional effects, as Ukrainian students seeking English language prep courses have increased substantially. Additionally, some Ukrainians feel forced to take jobs they see ill befitting their level of education.

As educated Ukrainians pursue English and look toward other countries, it's clear Ukrainians see their future in their homeland as lackluster. In 2015, over 90 percent of Ukrainians surveyed outside of Donbass called Ukraine's economic situation either "somewhat bad" or "very bad."

While economic opportunity flees the conflict and Ukrainians become disenchanted with life in Ukraine, Russian weapons have flowed into the region in covert support for the separatist movement. Everything you can think of as comprising the definition of military supplies, from Russian guns to tanks to anti-aircraft systems, have been found in eastern Ukraine even though pro-Russian separatists claim otherwise.

Yet, when Ukraine bid to block Russian support of the separatists, the UN found there was little evidence for direct Russian support of separatists. Although it cannot be proven to any definitive degree, it would be foolhardy to believe the country is not backing pro-Russian separatists despite these weapons found in the region.

The more Russia facilitates the war in eastern Ukraine, the more Ukrainians who feel their post-secondary education can suit them somewhere else feel the need to escape their crumbling homes.

Considering the reasons for the separatist movement and the resulting brain drain, one cannot ignore Russian migration in the Soviet era. An important basis for the intense cultural divide fostering the separatist movement is the postwar migration of 3 million Russian immigrants to other parts of the Soviet Union, including Ukraine.

For Ukraine in particular, this meant Russians ended up near the border in the east — naturally where the separatist rebellion has originated. It is not surprising that the regions where support for the rebel

government is strongest coincides with regions in Ukraine where, historically, Russians settled under the Soviet Union. As a result, pro-Russian sentiments in eastern Ukraine has a distinct ethnic basis, invoking memories of Soviet rule.

The movement of young, educated Ukrainians is thus not only caused by the simple threat of war, but deeply integrated with Ukraine's lingering — and demonstrably unwanted — ties with Russia. This migration from several decades ago influences the Ukrainian brain drain today, as the former supplies the nationalistic fuel for a war that has directly caused the latter.

It is unclear how the current conflict, sparked by the Euromaidan revolution, will eventually be resolved. It is especially unclear whether Ukraine will ever exist as a nation independent from Russia — free from worry of interference in its inner political workings or support of rogue separatist movements.

One cannot help but expect more bloodshed that forces Ukrainians to flee their homes, since Putin's Russia has clearly demonstrated it is unwilling to remove itself from Ukraine's concerns. As such, many Ukrainians will continue to look west in search of the opportunities that best suit the prosperous future they desire.

*Global*

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