will inevitably already be engaged in are unenviable. For its member states and the EU itself, Russia represents a varying existential case. States such as Lithuania and Poland believe Russia is a threat to their very existence, signalled by their invocation of NATO's Article 4 obligation to consult if a member feels threatened. Others believe that being forced into a course of action that is antithetical to European values is itself an existential crisis, that what the EU does in respect of Russia must be consistent with its identity as a normative power or the EU will itself become undefined and undefinable. 2014 has brought the EU into tricky territory, exposing the fissures in the European integration project. This is not in and of itself necessarily a bad thing. How the EU responds might be.

In policy-making circles, a weighing up of Russia's actions will have long been underway. The scales are not balanced in Russia's favour, there is little in its actions in either its foreign or domestic environments to suggest a charitable analysis should hold sway. The voices of certain central and eastern European states look prophetic in the face of Russia's annexation of Crimea, its green men, its support of separatists in eastern parts of Ukraine, its "humanitarian aid" convoys that do not respect borders and its swift breach of the Minsk agreements, as signalled by its support of separate elections in the breakaway regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. At home, Russia has passed ever more repressive laws that actively deny the rights of the LGBT communities, NGOs, journalists and political dissenters. State control of mainstream and social media has been tightened and legislation passed that constitutes early steps in bordering the internet. The EU has let many of the developments within Russia pass with little comment, consistent with a respect for sovereignty, but more consistent with an acceptance that it can do little to halt this retreat from liberal democratic principles. 2014 will remain infamous for many things, but it is vital the EU realise that its normative identity will not be served by keeping its head in the sand. Events call for a clear-eyed gaze and frank, even if regretful, assessment of the EU–Russia relationship as it is and not how the EU wishes it could be.

About the Author

Dr Maxine David is Lecturer in European Politics at the University of Surrey. She is a foreign policy analyst with particular expertise in Russian, EU and UK external relations. Her most recent work 'New Social Media: Modernisation and Democratisation in Russia' will be published in the first issue of *European Politics and Society* in 2015, available now in early view.

ANALYSIS

Central Asia's Dilemmas and the Paradoxical Lessons of the Ukrainian Crisis

Marlene Laruelle, Washington, D.C.

Abstract

Factoring in Central Asia's perception of the Ukrainian crisis means above all acknowledging: 1. The lack of factual data such as sociological surveys on which an analysis could rely; and 2. accepting to put each element of the sentence in the plural: there are several Central Asias, and several Ukrainian crises. Each of the five Central Asian countries has its own perception of the Ukrainian crisis. Each of these perceptions is far from monolithic and can be divided into several components—very schematically, political regimes, intellectual elites and activists, and public opinion. And there are at least three Ukrainian crises—EuroMaidan, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine—each with a distinct meaning: street revolution against a regime, annexation of part of the territory, and new secessionist conflict.

A Majority Pro-Russian Stance

In the five countries of Central Asia the political authorities have all issued relatively similar statements: all have appealed for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, and have called for the avoidance of military engagement and civilian victims. They have recognized the legitimacy of the Crimean referendum, with Nazarbayev going as far as to call the government in Kiyv "neo-fascist." Only Kyrgyzstan has done some jockeying by first recognizing Maidan as a legitimate change of power, before going back on its declaration. This massive pro-Russian stance differs from that adopted by Central Asian states during the war of August 2008, following which they did not recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Obviously these pro-Russian declarations are the official ones, where the point is to please Russia, but it is also evident that the Central Asian leaders are anxious. Nazarbayev, upset with the entry of Armenia into the Eurasian Economic Union against his country's wishes, has insisted on the fact that belonging to Eurasian institutions only makes sense if it brings positive results for Kazakhstan, and if not the country could leave the Eurasian construction. This raised the ire of Putin, who, during the Seliger summer camp, threatened Kazakhstan in barely concealed words by claiming that "Kazakhs had never had statehood." So paradoxically Kazakhstan is both the most pro-Russian state in Central Asia and the one that, precisely because it is a key member of the Eurasian Union project and the most targeted by potential Russian retaliations, can afford to make some open criticisms and stand up for its sovereignty. The other states of the region are either entirely dependent on Moscow with far lesser room for maneuver (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), or else more autonomous but also less directly concerned by Russia's reassertion (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan).

In each country of Central Asia the regimes are much more concerned by the potential risks of a Maidan—or any type of "colored revolution"—occurring at home than by threats to their territorial sovereignty. They are right in their assessment: Ukraine lost part of its sovereignty not because Vladimir Putin suddenly decided he would act to annex Crimea and destabilize Eastern Ukraine, but because the authorities in Kiyv were defeated by the EuroMaidan protests. If Yanukovitch had not left power in the conditions that he did, Ukraine would probably still be a unified state. Similar to the Tajik civil war from 1992–1997 and the two Kyrgyz revolutions in 2005 and 2010, in Central Asia democratic processes, the challenging of power of competing elites and street actions are apprehended as direct paths to state collapse and the jeopardizing of national sovereignty. The lesson was well learnt in Central Asia, in particular in Kazakhstan: if the country wants to prevent Moscow from peering into its internal problems, it has to avoid a presidential succession that could turn into an intra-elite conflict.

Even if the other Central Asian regimes have no common borders with Russia, in theory they could be affected from potential pressure from Moscow. Kyrgyzstan is open to pressure through its Russian minority, but also and more importantly via its labor migrants and dual citizens. As in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and to a lesser degree Uzbekistan, many labor migrants are also dual citizens, not merely the Russian minority. (Only Turkmenistan would appear to be sheltered.) As for Uzbekistan, the government is concerned about sudden appeals being made to autonomy from the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan, which has discretely attempted to rekindle its traditional mistrust of Tashkent and its decided sympathy for neighboring Kazakhstan. Preparations for the parliamentary elections in December 2014 and presidential elections in early 2015 in Uzbekistan, and of parliamentary elections in Tajikistan in February 2015 is aggravating sensitivities; the regimes know that this moment is one of potential political risks, and that now, in addition to the risk of jeopardizing the current status quo, there is the possibility of Moscow's direct or indirect involvement. As a result, the Tajik authorities have recently clamped down on social media such as Facebook, and have implemented repressive measures against the traditional opposition of the Islamic Rebirth Party and against the political agitations of the Tajik diaspora in Russia.

The intellectual elites and activists are more divided than the regimes. Those with nationalist feelings or those reading Western sources, often via internet and social media, seem to share a relatively pro-Ukrainian stance, either in the name of the fight against "Russian imperialism," or in support of the democratic values and Western orientations showed by the Maidan people. On the other side of the spectrum, the Soviet-trained elites and the Russian speaking population tend to adhere to Moscow's perception. This divide probably goes hand-in-hand with some generation gap (nationalists or pro-Westerners are proportionally younger than the Soviet trained elites and the Russian minorities) but there are insufficient studies to confirm that impression. The division is most glaring in Kazakhstan, where a movement of young nationalist activists has emerged and is spreading with relative success slogans against the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union.

Among the population, it is very hard to come with reliable information in the form of sociological surveys. However, pace the West's wishful thinking, the Russian interpretation of the Ukrainian crisis seems to prevail. Explaining this pro-Russian stance by evoking "Russian propaganda" is a simplistic and biased analysis of Central Asian public opinion. The memory of the trauma of early 1990s—a collapsing economy hampering individual life projects—is projected onto Ukraine, which is viewed as a state that is close to economic and political failure, as a state with corrupt elites that lack any long-term vision of statehood. Russia, on the contrary, is largely supported by Central Asian public opinion. It is seen as a "born again" country that has been able to avoid the path of state collapse, has revived its economy, and reasserted itself as a great power on the international scene. Russia's economic successes are embodied in grassroots descriptions given by Central Asian labor migrants of their stays in Russia, and their ability to send remittances home.

Short- and Long-Term Consequences

Western pundits who consider that Central Asia's dominant pro-Russian stance during the Ukrainian crisis can be explained only by recourse to Russia's hard power and media propaganda are missing part of the picture. The Central Asian regimes are as supportive as Moscow of any established regimes, of media control, and of avoiding positive reports on any popular action that would challenge the political status quo, at home or abroad. Maidan has been interpreted as a direct threat to all the regimes without them having to listen to Russian media or to follow "Moscow's hand." Perceptions among the public, the majority of whom probably share the Russian interpretation, rest heavily on the traumas of the 1990s and on migrants' personal stories of their lives in Russia, which thus gives preeminence to Russian-oriented readings. Last but not least, the frames through which the world is perceived are deeply shaped by conspirological schemes, in which Ukraine is nothing but a pawn in the West's long-term and "civilizational" struggle against Russia. Dismissing these perceptions as irrational doesn't help us to understand why they make sense in the current social and cultural context of Central Asia.

The consequences of the Ukrainian crisis for Central Asia are multiple. Short term, it has obviously reinforced Russia's influence in the region, and sheds new light on Moscow's desire to advance the Eurasian Union project and strengthen the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The Central Asian states feel that, were there to be serious discord with Moscow, they are now in greater jeopardy. Although it must be recognized that Moscow has never played the hand of the "Russian minorities" with them, contrary to the way it has in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and the Baltic states.

The Ukrainian crisis has also made the Central Asian authorities more reticent about challenging Moscow by welcoming Western initiatives, and has profoundly discredited the West. The mainstream perception of the US accumulating defeats in Afghanistan, Syria, and now Iraq, and its failure to protect Ukraine's territory and international law does not encourage anyone to take risks in its favor. Central Asian regimes and populations thus have to fall back on a very realist perception of international relations, in which what counts foremost are concrete relations of power, the force of geography, of history, and of economic presence, and not aspirational principles. However, at the same time, for the regimes and the elites, fears of yielding on their famed "multi-vectorial" approach to foreign policy and of finding themselves facing Moscow with only China as a partner, ought to encourage more refined the adoption of "third neighborhood" policy strategies. It is, however, unlikely that Western countries will benefit from this, especially not when they push a normative agenda in matters of human rights and of democratization. Priority will probably be given to second-order states in Asia or in the Middle-East, and to multilateral institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

On a medium- and long-term scale, Russia has weakened its legitimacy in the region. In the 2000s, Putin invested a lot in normalizing the country and its relations with the Central Asian states, wanting to appear as a stable, reliable, and predictable partner. It invested in a China-inspired economic "good neighborhood." However, suddenly we see the return of the specter of Russia playing with hybrid war tools, including fomenting domestic instabilities. Seen from Central Asia, the main issue is not so much a powerful and assertive Russia but an unpredictable one, for which the red lines not to be crossed are not made explicit (although they had in fact been explicit for Ukraine). Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan seem largely isolated from any direct risk and are able to manage asymmetrical relations with Russia, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan really do not have any future outside of maintaining privileged relations with Russia.

It is for Kazakhstan that the consequences are the most problematic. The regime may face decreasing levels of pro-Russian public opinion, which the next president will have to take into consideration, and a potential overlap between intra-elite tensions with resources sharing and geopolitical orientations that Russia could use to its advantage. More importantly maybe is the fact that the Kazakh elites, backed in this by widespread popular support, are nothing other than pro-Kazakhstan. Any supranational institutions that would limit Kazakhstan's political autonomy will be steadily refused, with the hope that Moscow will not consider them as being its new "red lines." Social consensus in Kazakhstan being built on the improvement of living standards, the failure of the Customs Union/Eurasian Economic Union to show real positive influence on the Kazakh economy would also impact negatively Russia's legitimacy in the country and the conciliatory narrative of the Kazakh authorities. Whatever the future looks like, Kazakhstan will continue to search for other trade partners to avoid not only the political risk of being too dependent on Moscow, but also the economic risks that being too reliable on Russian economy may bear.

For this is the true paradox of the crisis: despite their discontent about Russia's reassertion and the concerns about maintaining sovereignty, the Central Asian states, in particular Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and to a lesser extend Uzbekistan, are obliged to hope that Russia's economy will continue to blossom and not collapse. If international sanctions seriously impair Russia's development, the repercussions on the Kazakh economy, on Russian investments in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—which have already been affected by the rapid price increase of Russian fuel—and on the millions of Central Asian households whose future depends on remittances would be terrible and ultimately dangerous for the legitimacy of the established regimes. Through good times and bad, a prosperous Russia is what the Central Asians have to hope for. The second conclusion is that during the Ukrainian crisis preserving state sovereignty has aligned with regime security. The slogan to sum this up could well be: to avoid the destiny of Crimea, don't have a Maidan at home. This will certainly not contribute to the democratization of the Central Asian regimes.

About the Author

Marlene Laruelle is the Director of the Central Asia Program at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs.