Book Reviews

Richard Sakwa  
*Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*  

The crisis in and over Ukraine has shattered relations between the West and Russia. A major blow has been dealt to previous optimistic predictions that the post-Cold War order would open up new opportunities for a more benign system of European security that would benefit the shared neighborhood between the EU and Russia the most. Quite to the contrary: What started as a domestic dispute over a trade agreement with the EU, in late 2013, quickly mushroomed into the bloodiest conflict in Europe since the horrors of the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The Crimean issue, in particular, seems to be pushing us back into the XIX century, a time when great powers violently acquired territory whenever they pleased, and when others suffered what they must.

But what accounts both for the crisis and for its gravity? Unfortunately, so far, scholarly analysis only has been dealing with isolated issues. Some have focused on the broader picture of relations between “the” West and Russia after the Cold War, thereby concealing or—at least—neglecting other important variables that may be found in the domestic political development of Ukraine. While these thinkers provide a rather narrow and simplistic picture of the “Russian strangulation of the Ukrainian economy”, others point to home-made institutional problems through which power structures, paternalistic networks, and hybrid behavioral patterns remained intact behind the façade of democratic elections, leading the country into an economic and political abyss since 1991. Further, it should not go unnoticed that accusations against Russia made by no small number of politicians—even if some of these accusations are entirely legitimate—in some cases transcend into the creation of enemy images, a tendency that lends itself to disconcerting symbolism in light of recent observances marking the 100th anniversary of the commencement of hostilities at the beginning of World War I. And it would be very naïve to assume that the academic community is totally immune to this.
Indeed, what Henry Kissinger so accurately noted when speaking about the realm of international politics—“the demonization of Vladimir Putin is not a policy; it is an alibi for the absence of one”—also appears to hold true for scholarly accounts of the Ukrainian crisis. In an atmosphere of distortions, truth wars, and mutual accusations, Richard Sakwa provides, with his book Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands, an accurate, overdue, and—as far as it is possible—unbiased analysis that enables the reader to get a deeper view of both the root and proximate causes of the Ukraine crisis.

As a matter of fact, the old saying that “all politics is local” is not just an empty phrase; it is a permanent reminder not to underestimate local drivers of politics and their implications for the bigger picture. By this token, Sakwa identifies as a starting point two different and very contrasting domestic conceptions and ideas of Ukrainian statehood that were in a long-standing hybrid balance prior to 2014. Whereas the monist conception advocates an officially monolingual, unitary, and culturally specific statehood model that deliberately denies common historical pathways with Russia, the pluralist notion does not necessarily deny the need for the centrality of cultural Ukrainian features such as language, but it emphasizes the idea of a country with multiple identities that could turn into some kind of a consociational state with good relations with all of its neighbors. The beauty of this conception of dichotomy lies in the fact that Sakwa does not go into the primordialist trap of reducing the conflict to its allegedly solely ethnic core of “ethnic” Ukrainians versus “ethnic” Russians or “West Ukraine” versus “East Ukraine”. What the author does so handsomely is to illustrate this dichotomy as an ideological clash. Indeed, on both sides of the contemporary battlefield around Donetsk and Lugansk, fighters and soldiers often speak only Russian. But Sakwa’s dichotomy explains very well why controversial historical figures such as Stepan Bandera or Vladimir Lenin are so differently perceived in different regions of Ukraine, similar to the black and red colors of the Bandera movement and the black and orange of the St. George Ribbon.

Following a description of this dichotomy, the author explains that the February revolution of 2014 meant a temporary victory for the monist camp in Ukraine. But he further elaborates that the clash of these two different conceptions was—through the seizure of power by the Maidan movement—immediately internationalized, turning local contrasting conceptions into a major geopolitical tug of war with Russia indulging in neo-revisionist support for opponents of the new February government of 2014. In this context, however, Sakwa expresses harsh criticism aimed at the EU and the United States. He claims that the West is to bear part of the blame for Russia’s becoming a revisionist power. In particular, he criticizes the failure of the EU to deny Moscow effective participation in the process of EU-Ukraine free trade negotiations since the outcomes