

Reality Check on Ukraine

Tuesday 25 July 2023, by [VANAIAK Achin](#) (Date first published: 24 July 2023).

This is not an original text but an extraction of data and arguments about certain events from three recently published outstanding contributions that help to decisively puncture the claims of those who in large part or whole attribute responsibility on the Russia-Ukraine war on the US-led NATO thereby softening when not denying the culpability of Russia under Putin. This paper is primarily though not solely meant for an Indian readership that may not have had easy access to these key documents.

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Each of these important articles also has at different points in the main text links to related pieces confirming the specific arguments then being made. These links should be followed up. 1) John Feffer, "The Peace Movement and Ukraine: John Feffer Replies to Critics", June 30, 2023 at <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article66999> 2) Murray Smith, "Russia's war on Ukraine and the European Lefts", July 16, 2023 at <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article67205> 3) Michael Karadjis, "Ukraine myths used to justify Putin's terror", June 13, 2023 at <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article66954>

The Supposed Coup in Ukraine in 2014

1. Between November 2013 and February 2014 hundreds of thousands protested against the President V. Yanukovich, making this a popular uprising not an orchestrated coup by the US. That others forces inside or outside (like the US) will try to manipulate such mass upsurges when they unexpectedly break out is unsurprising but to call the Maidan protests and its outcome a coup is ridiculous.

2. The only flimsy basis for the coup accusation is the claim that the replacement---not for the next President---but for the caretaker Prime Minister was one preferred by the US adviser V. Nuland. He was A. Yatsenyuk and was chosen as interim PM by the Ukrainian parliament out of three possible choices. The previous PM M. Azarov belonging to Yanukovich's 'Party of the Regions' had resigned on January 28, 2014. Incidentally, the pro-Russia Yanukovich (and therefore designated as an opponent of the US) had on January 25 offered the Premiership to the same Yatsenyuk clearly indicating that the new PM was not a stooge of the US but something of a general compromise candidate acceptable to a wide range of forces domestically.

3. The peak of the protests was reached in February when police fired and killed a 100 protestors

and Yanukovych fled to Russia (along with his estimated wealth of several billion dollars) on February 21 fearing an imminent impeachment. On February 22 the whole Ukrainian parliament including every single member of the Yanukovych's own Party voted to expel him as President---were all bribed or otherwise subordinated to the wishes of the US? On February 23 the parliament appointed O. Turchynov as interim President, a name not figuring in the leaked Nuland correspondences that were supposed to have exposed US machinations to get their own personnel in power. In May the parliament elected P. Poroshenko as President.

4. In the subsequent parliamentary elections in October 2014 the parties of Yatsenyuk and Poroshenko got a majority of seats with the Party of Regions getting less than 10% and the far-right 'neo-Nazi' parties that were also supposedly behind and dominating the Maidan protests could not clear the threshold and got no seats.

The Crimean Question

1. Ukraine after the break-up of the USSR had the third largest arsenal of NWS. It gave this up to Russia in return for the finalized 1994 Budapest Memorandum where the UK, US and Russia agreed to fully respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. This was carried out when B. Yeltsin was head of Russia. In 2011 Putin is reported to have told Clinton "I don't agree with this deal. And I don't support it. And I am not bound by it". [1]. Indian supporters and rationalisers of the Russian invasion have failed to seriously condemn this imperialist behaviour, preferring largely to ignore this brutal violation.

2. The plan to annex Crimea and the 'peoples republics' in Donbas was discussed before the fall of Yanukovych. In this regard a document was presented for discussion to the Presidential administration and a year later this was revealed and published in full by the Russian newspaper, Novaya Gazeta of February 26, 2015.

3. On February 27, 2014 Russia invaded Crimea, threw out the democratically elected autonomous state government replacing it with stooge members of the 'Russian Unity' party which had received only 4% in previous state elections.

4. Between March 6 and 16 an **illegal** referendum because held under military rule took place and Russia claimed 97% support for Crimea joining Russia. International observers were invited only from far-right European parties that already declared their support for Crimea's incorporation in Russia. However, the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group said the turnout was between 30 to 50 percent. Moreover, despite Crimea being the only part of Ukraine with a slim ethnic Russian majority population, in a February 8 to 18, 2014 Ukraine-wide poll, only 41% of the population of Crimea favoured joining Russia. *We are to believe that such are the powers of Russian persuasion that a month later this has become 97%*. Incidentally, the referendum deliberately excluded a third option of staying in Ukraine but with the existing very popular status of being an autonomous unit with corresponding specific powers.

5. Historically the indigenous population of Crimea are Tartars. But both Tsarist and Stalin's rule ensured that from once being the overwhelming majority they would be reduced to around 12% today. They were totally opposed to the referendum. They also had their own *Mejils* (parliament). Putin disbanded this and the *Mejils* in exile demands the return of Crimea to Ukraine.

Donbas

1. Ethnic Ukrainians are 58% of the Luhansk oblast (region) and 57% of the Donetsk oblast in Donbas and a considerable number of ethnic Russians have no desire to be independent of Ukraine. Large numbers in this region support having some kind of autonomous or special status especially after the 2019 law which rescinded the status of Russian as an official language even as it retained it for municipal areas having a significant Russian speaking population. Clearly there is more displeasure in Donbas with the Kiev government than in western Ukraine and it led to their own peaceful protests. But this does not translate into majority support for independence or for Russian absorption.
2. Nor can it be seen as justification for Putin's claims let alone his invasion in 2014 and his mercenary troops that promoted and allied with small local separatist groups to oust existing regional governments in Luhansk and Donetsk. This was a decisive step in militarizing a conflict with resulting deaths and casualties that should and could have otherwise been avoided. Then concocted referendums in May 2014 claimed large majorities were for secession. However, in April 2014 a Pew Research Centre poll showed that only 18% in the East wanted to secede and only 27% of Russian speakers. [2] The first Prime Minister of the 'Donetsk Peoples Republic' was A. Borodia, not only a citizen of Russia but an officer in the FSB (successor of the KGB) and a far-right ultranationalist. [3]
3. A civil war like situation subsequently merged between the Ukrainian army and the separatists whereby the latter not having anywhere near sufficient support from the civilian population in the East had to count on the involvement of mercenaries (mostly far-right) as well as from sections of the Russian military. Moscow claimed these latter incursions were accidental crossings across the border or soldiers on leave deciding on their own time to intervene to help their fellow Russians. It is in this situation that the ceasefire Minsk agreements emerged.

The Two Minsk Agreements

1. Minsk I was signed in September 2014 by Ukraine, Russia, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the leaders of the self-declared but not formally recognized 'Luhansk Peoples Republic' (LPR) and 'Donetsk Peoples Republic' (DPR). Apart from a ceasefire, release of hostages and illegal detainees, the two key provisions were a) adoption of and then early elections in particular districts of Luhansk and Donetsk in accordance with the Ukrainian law 'On temporary Order of Local Self-governance'; b) withdrawal of illegal armed groups, fighter, military equipment and mercenaries from Ukraine; c) a designated buffer zone. The OSCE would monitor the implementation.
2. It was the Separatists who soon violated the agreement going on the offensive to capture the Donetsk airport which it had not held at the time of agreement leading to a resumption of fighting. There was direct intervention this time by Russian forces as well as new heavy weaponry brought in and in February 2015 Minsk II was signed via mediation by France and Germany. Violation of Minsk I had already shifted the ground situation in favour of Russia and its allied Separatists when the new status quo of Minsk II was established.
3. Now a new Constitution was to come into force by 2015 end providing for decentralization and local elections in Donetsk and Luhansk as part of a comprehensive political settlement. The withdrawal of Russian and illegal armed forces and military equipment would begin immediately and be fulfilled under the supervision of the OSCE after completion of the political settlement with full

restoration of Ukrainian control over its state borders. If the Ukrainian side can be said to have stalled over the process of completing the political settlement the other side certainly stalled over their responsibilities on the military-security side. Indeed, between 2015 and 2022 the OSCE observer mission repeatedly confirmed incursions of fighting Russian troops, military equipment and vehicles, and periodic convoys returning to Russia carrying the bodies of Russian soldier casualties who were posthumously awarded service medals in Russia.

4. There was a sharp difference between the Ukrainian government and Russia and its proxies about the nature of the proposed decentralization. The former wanted a three tier structure of power delegation at the oblast, district and community levels to best provide public welfare services as well as maximize accountability and control to those at the lowest community level. Russia wanted a federalized system with much greater powers to the states to even decide their foreign policy. This would mean much greater authority to regional elites with whom pro-Russian oligarchs could join up with and even move in the direction of subsequent secession. How to then amend the Ukrainian constitution was made hostage to this bitter divide. [4]

5. This is the logic behind Putin's basic approach to the question of special status of the Donbas Republics and mirrors what he has sought to do in Georgia and Moldova. Russia occupies South Ossetia and Abkhazia and has a strong military presence there but calls them independent republics. Only four other countries Venezuela, Nauru, Nicaragua and Syria recognize their independent status. In Moldova, Russia controls the breakaway but still unrecognized Transnistria region where it is claimed that Russians are oppressed and where too, the Russian military has a presence.

6. Minsk II despite all its deficiencies and the skepticisms of both sides about its efficacy, nevertheless to the very end still represented a situation of lower intensity conflict far superior to outright full-scale war that later emerged. It is not Ukraine but Russia that two days before its February 24, 2022 invasion, declared Minsk II invalid and walked out of it.

The March-end 2022 Deal That Failed

1. There are those in the pacifist camp as well as those who give undue explanatory weight to NATO expansionism as the main factor for Russian 'reaction' that a peace deal was in the offing at March end 2022 but was scuttled by the US/UK because they wanted to further 'bleed' Russia and had control over Zelensky and his government. The official Russian claim by its foreign minister S. Lavrov was that Ukraine would take NATO membership off the table, settle for Western security guarantees---the nature of which still had to be finalized---and then Russia would withdraw to the pre-invasion line. Although Russia has shown duplicity repeatedly one is here supposed to take it at its word.

2. A member, B. Marcetic of the leftwing Jacobin board, supported this story basing his conclusion on an interview given to an Israeli journalist by N. Bennett, the former PM who worked as a mediator for that possible settlement; and on a report in the English language newspaper *Ukrainska Pravda*. Yet as a close and detailed study of both reveals, there were hesitations on both sides---Zelensky wondering whether Putin could be trusted and Putin unhappy about the security guarantees being offered because they would cover the whole of Ukraine including Donbas. The real reason for the negotiations being scuttled was not Western opposition but the Russian escalation despite the ongoing talks when it carried out the massacre in Bucha, photographic and video evidence of which emerged on April 1, 2022. Putin unsurprisingly claimed this was a fabricated account. The very sources cited to claim that the West was responsible for the Deal failing, actually confirm that Bucha was the turning point and Deal breaker. [5]

3. The real unfolding story begins with the 2014 Russian troop invasion that illegally took over Crimea and installed Russian military presence, directly and indirectly in eastern Ukraine. These actions were not because of fear of NATO expansion or because the US was waging a proxy war--- the misleading claims currently made for explaining the 2022 *further* troop invasion. The preparations for what was meant to be the culminating act in this longer term process of deliberately eroding and destroying Ukrainian sovereignty was taking place throughout 2021 right up to February 24, 2022.

4. That is why even as Russia said it was seeking to 'liberate' Donbas immediately marched on to try and capture the capital Kiev itself. It is when, unexpected by everyone including the US and NATO, the heroic and successful resistance by Ukraine prevented Putin from succeeding in this endeavour that the March-end talks took place. For Putin this was a stalling tactic and it should be clear from this long history of what Russia has been doing since 2014 that Putin has never intended to retreat to the pre-February 24, 2022 military status quo.

5. *The fundamental character of this conflict is not that it is a proxy war or a 'hybrid' war but that it is war of national liberal and national defence on one side against a criminal and illegal invasion and occupation by a Russia guilty of terrible and inhuman war crimes against the civilian population of Ukraine.* For a principled left, Indian and international, the stand must be one of an unconditional but always critical support and solidarity with the Ukrainian people in their fight for self-determination This stance includes accepting their right to get arms, advice and intelligence support from anywhere even as we can warn against the motivations of their suppliers. We oppose US imperialism and NATO expansion even as we oppose the imperialism of Russia.

What Now?

A sober assessment of the ground situation is that a war of attrition has emerged and is likely to continue. Russia has ensured that NATO has actually expanded its membership and encroachment area with the incorporation of Finland and Sweden. One would have to think Putin a complete fool to believe that he did not know he was going to strengthen and help expand NATO by his 2022 invasion even if he had succeeded in all his conquering aims. Both his own public declarations to his own citizens and his foreign policy behaviour towards his neighbours and towards the members of the military alliance structure, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CTSO) that Russia heads, make clear that his primary goal has always been to take over as much Ukrainian territory as possible as part of his wider pursuit to re-establish Russia's own formal and informal empire. The question of autonomous and devolved powers for the people of Luhansk and Donetsk to be exercised by their democratically elected and accountable representatives has always been subordinate to Russian ambitions and purposes.

Since this has become a war of attrition there will be calls for ceasefire and possible negotiations from many sides. Given the existing and likely relationship of forces on the ground any finally negotiated agreement will most likely mean some degree of Russian control over Ukrainian territory and therefore an injustice. The very fact of Ukrainian resistance has significantly reduced Russia's bargaining power but not eliminated this. It is not for those of us outside to impose our 'solutions' or proposals to end the war let alone to call for an end to arms supplies to Ukraine. On the contrary, it is for us to call for creating the kind of pressure that can push Russia to retreat if not withdraw completely. It is for the people of Ukraine and their political representatives to decide whether to have an agreement and if so, of what kind and containing what compromises? And this may well result from the undue influence and power of the very government elites that say they support the just struggle of the Ukrainian people but prioritise their own class interests. This situation is not in

our hands. But what is clear is that our moral and political commitment must remain solidarity with the just struggle of the Ukrainian people and respect for their right to decide their political future.

Achin Vanaik

July 24, 2023

Footnotes

[1] See <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article67205>

[2] See <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/05/08/despite-concerns-about-governance-ukrainians-want-to-remain-one-country/>

[3] See <https://www.thebulwark.com/what-really-happened-in-ukraine-in-2014-and-since-then/?fbclid=IwAR1HIWBW9EztL8cug0xcRc96wJnQUb64M2JusQNW1725kGUWMxNnQ6EdBps>

[4] See <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25029>

[5] See <https://www.thebulwark.com/no-the-united-states-and-its-allies-did-not-blow-up-a-ukraine-russia-peace-deal/>