Tomasz Stępniewski: The Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine and the subsequent crisis came as a surprise for many scholars. Was the Euromaidan a surprise for you as well? Had you anticipated the fact that events resembling the Orange Revolution of 2004, sooner or later, would resurface in Ukraine?

George Soroka: The timing of it was a bit of surprise—I had not expected Yanukovych, whom I regarded as corrupt but pragmatic, to reverse course so abruptly on the European Association Agreement. But that something like this would eventually happen, and probably sooner rather than later? No, this was not a surprise. Anyone who has spent time in Ukraine knows how pervasive official corruption is and how sick of it normal, decent people are. And make no mistake, the Association Agreement was seen by many Ukrainians as a way to battle back against institutionalized corruption at home, not just as a means through which Ukraine could forge closer ties with the EU for the sake of becoming more “European” (whatever this means) or to enter the West’s economic and strategic orbit, although the latter was certainly a major consideration as well.

While living in Kyiv in 2009, during the last year of Viktor Yushchenko’s presidency, I talked with activists who
had participated in the Orange Revolution, and I understood how disappointed they were with the political outcome—or rather, lack of substantive outcome after 2004. The same was true with non-activists, regular people just trying to live their lives. Young people trying to make careers for themselves, old people trying to survive on meager pensions; a great many were fundamentally disillusioned with the system. And then Yanukovych was elected, and things went from bad to worse in many respects. So yes, I think it was only a matter of time.

Let me add that part of the reason for the Euromaidan protests occurring was that the Ukrainian state has also become more self-conscious about its sovereignty since the early 2000s. Ukraine is a fascinating country with much more complex cultural, ethno-linguistic, and ideological divisions than the hackneyed East/West, pro-Russia, pro-West divide would indicate. But as to what constituted a Ukrainian state, or what this state stood for? That was less clear in the 1990s, and this in many respects suited the purposes of leaders like Kravchuk and Kuchma, who did not want to have a difficult conversation about Ukraine’s recent history and the divisions it created and reinforced among the Ukrainian people. They simply did not want to address the palpable divides in Ukrainian society at a state level (Kuchma eventually started to do so, but relatively late in the game and in reaction to mounting political pressure). But beginning in the early 2000s, it became harder to avoid confronting these divides and grappling with them politically. By the time of the Orange Revolution, it was impossible. So although Yushchenko was mostly unsuccessful in his attempts to reconcile different Ukrainian identities and their associated historical memories under a common patriotic banner, he did succeed in focusing the organs of the state on this conversation. Concomitantly, society as a whole was also becoming more attuned to the idea of Ukraine as a political entity, even though people were not yet ready to agree on what it meant in ideological or practical terms. This, combined with Vladimir Putin’s increasingly assertive foreign policy in Russia and Yanukovych’s generally more pro-Moscow stance, made the question of which direction the country would tilt more urgent. As a result, the Euromaidan very dramatically manifested ideational tensions that had been simmering in Ukraine for years.

**In your opinion, what was the main driver sparking off the Euromaidan? Was Russia the driver? Or maybe the Euromaidan was only a cover for plans Russia made earlier? Or maybe it was the corrupt Yanukovych’s removal from power and subsequent threat to Russia’s interests in Ukraine?**

The main driver behind the Euromaidan was the large segment of Ukrainian society fed up with endemic corruption that hoped the European Association Agreement would set the country on a new course, helping
it develop politically and economically. But instead, they had this prospect yanked out from underneath them at the last moment. Yanukovych did not help matters with his tone-deaf and heavy-handed response to the early protests, which only made it more likely large-scale violence would eventually break out.

As for Russia, I do not believe the Kremlin had any sort of plan in mind with respect to annexing Crimea or fomenting a crisis in the Donbas beforehand. Putin is not a grand tactician. He is an opportunist. The Kremlin was flying “by the seat of its pants” and simply saw a chance it could exploit and seized it. But it bit off more than it could comfortably chew—the Russians did not expect that the annexation of Crimea would provoke such a strong response from Ukraine’s neighbors and the West more generally.

However, I will say that what happened plays well with the narrative of a trans-state Russian civilization (Russkiy mir) that Putin has been promoting in recent years. In this sense, the pump was primed at home for Moscow to take advantage of the situation in Ukraine when it presented itself, by claiming to be protecting Russian speakers from the “fascist” forces operating in Kyiv. But at the same time, it would be wrong to dismiss, as many in the West have implicitly done, those Ukrainian citizens—and I mean ethnic Ukrainians, not just Russians living in Ukraine—that strongly identify with Russia and believe in a common civilizational bond. They exist, their concerns and fears are real, and they need to be listened to and have their points of view respected.

To address the last part of your question, Russia obviously also has real strategic and economic interests in Ukraine, and many Russians genuinely felt these were being threatened by the political instability the Euromaidan brought. The degree to which the Kremlin actually believed this or simply utilized it as an excuse for getting involved is debatable, but in either case, Russia’s response was predictable.

I would like to ask your opinion on the reasons for the annexation of Crimea by Russia. What were the real reasons behind this particular decision?

You know, it has become a trite observation to note that many in Russia, Putin chief among them, rue the loss of global prestige and status the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought to their country. But it is trite only in the sense that it is so obviously true; Russians to-day persist in treating Ukraine like a phantom limb, one they feel must surely still be attached, all evidence to the contrary aside. So the first point is that Russia’s involvement in the Ukrainian crisis is primarily about how the optics of this situation play out domestically.

On this level, the annexation demonstrates that Russia is still a power to be reckoned with, a bear, if you will, that does not need to ask permission before it acts. Crimea is also strongly connected to a normative argument about righting a perceived “historical wrong,” the idea being that Russia simply reclaimed what was rightfully hers. But events in Crimea may also be understood in terms of a more strategic cost-benefit analysis.

From an economic standpoint, Russia is promising to pour a great deal of money into Crimea. Supposedly, the funds are designated for raising pensions and the salaries of state-sector employees, as well as for modernizing and developing the region’s infrastructure, a primary goal being to wean the peninsula off of its dependence on Ukraine for its energy needs. But the Kremlin also gets a lot in return.

Russian officials claim that the potentially massive hydrocarbon reserves off the Crimean coast did not figure into their calculus over Crimea, but it is very hard to believe them. Moreover, Russia now stands to save billions of dollars annually, no longer having to subsidize the price of Ukraine’s gas imports in exchange for maintaining its naval base in Sevastopol. And, of course, Crimea also has land-based natural resources and is a major tourist destination.

Having mentioned all this, the second point I want to emphasize—and this is one that many in the West willfully ignore—is that the situation with Crimea is historically complicated. What happened in March 2014 was not just the “annexation of Crimea by Russia,” a formulation which suggests no local agency was present. The reality of the matter is that many residents of Crimea wanted to go with Russia, if only to avoid the eventual fate of the Donbas. The Crimean peninsula has been an ethnic Russian enclave for decades, so even if the referendum to secede had been perfectly transparent and legitimate, the majority of residents would still likely have voted to leave Ukraine. The direction, if not the magnitude, of the results would have been the same.

So from the perspective of how Russia seized the territory—this was inexcusable under international law.
But from the perspective of which country the majority of residents choose to identify with, I am less certain this was a tragedy for either Crimea or Ukraine in the long term. However, it remains to be seen what the eventual status of minority populations in Crimea will be under Russian rule; the Crimean Tatars, in particular, are not overly enamored with Moscow, the memory of Stalin’s forced deportations still not having faded.

**What are the chances for solving the Crimea issue?**

It depends what you mean by solving. If you mean the West normalizing relations with Russia, I think this is possible in the next few years, though it will be a hard road to travel. But reconciliation may be aided if both sides find common ground for cooperation on other issues, such as defeating ISIS in Syria and Iraq. This might permit them to save face, and facilitate better relations. But Crimea returning to Ukraine? No. Crimea is lost for the foreseeable future. Putin cannot backtrack on the decision to annex Crimea without appearing weak at home, and he cannot afford this. He is not a dictator who can act with utter impunity; there are forces in and around the Kremlin that would react badly to a reversal on this issue. Moreover, he does not strike me as the type of man whose psychological makeup would permit such an action even if he could get away with it. As for Poroshenko, he has no cards to play. Kyiv cannot make a credible military threat against Russian forces in Crimea, and the West is not foolish enough to wade into this matter any further than it already has.

Russia frequently reminds the world about the “humiliation syndrome” referring to the case of post WWI Germany and the consequences of such humiliation. Can the “Weimar syndrome” stand behind Russia’s present policy i.e. Russia-Ukraine war, annexation of Crimea and keeping the West at bay?

Well, it sure provides a convenient excuse. However, I do not want to be so cynical as to suggest there is nothing to this idea beyond the instrumental uses it can be put to. Yes, I think Russia was humiliated after the fall of the Soviet Union, and Putin feels this acutely. Over the years, he has repeatedly used the image of Russia being put “on her knees” by the West. I am fairly sure he actually believes this enervation of the Russian economy and military was deliberate. And to some degree probably it was; the old Cold War hawks in the United States and Western Europe were surely not sad about this outcome.

But I also believe it is naïve to explain all of Russia’s actions through the lens of national humiliation, just as I think it is equally naïve to refuse to acknowledge humiliation plays any role in how Putin sees Russia’s place in the world today. Putin has made the regaining of international prestige, as measured by military and diplomatic clout, a cornerstone of his political vision. He wants Russia to be regarded as a country to be reckoned with, a real power capable of playing by rules that are more flexible than those imposed on less important
states. But at the end of the day, I think economic realities trump ideational ones.

**Russia’s decision-makers headed by V. Putin quite frequently state that the world order needs to be transformed in a way granting Russia a more worthy role in the world, possibly even the leading role. Do you think that such plans can materialise and the West will yield to Russia?**

Putin talks a great deal about a multi-polar world. And he certainly sees himself and Russia at the head of an emerging Eurasian community, a link between Europe, which he is more and more disillusioned by, and an economically vibrant and dynamic Asia. China, incidentally, also shares this vision, and it is probably appealing to leaders in Iran and India as well—two countries to which Russia has lately been making economic and military overtures.

But no, I don’t think there is any chance the West, or more specifically the United States, will voluntarily yield to Russia on this matter, even though maintaining a unipolar world has cost the U.S. a great deal, squandering both lives and resources. And for all that we can point to Kremlin power brokers with a KGB or Cold War mentality, a version of that mentality is also present in Washington and in Western and Central European capitals.

In some quarters, there exists what I can only characterize as an almost pathological loathing and distrust of Russia.

Eventually, of course, the United States may not have a choice. All empires, whether material or ideational, eventually come to the end of their influence. What is clear is that a hegemonic world order, with the United States acting as the globe’s police force—supported to various degrees and in various capacities by often reluctant European allies—is not a sustainable model, nor is it a normatively good model. But neither is necessarily dividing the world into spheres of realist influence, where material interests prevail above all else, which is essentially what Putin proposes to do with multipolarity. The reason he can make common cause with a leader like Xi Jinping is that both believe in the concept of hard sovereignty, meaning non-interference in a state’s internal affairs whatever its policies on things like human rights, and a pragmatic foreign policy.

**In your opinion, will the Russia-Ukraine war lead to the emergence of a political nation in Ukraine?**

Are there any threats originating from radicalisation and nationalism for Ukraine and its relationship with neighbouring countries, including Poland?

It will take more than a geographically limited war to lead to the emergence of a unified political nation in Ukraine. And the question as you phrased it is loaded. Russia is supporting the separatists and Russians—not just ethnic Russians living in Ukraine, but Russians who have come across the border—are indeed fighting on the ground, but we should not forget that there are home-grown Ukrainian elements on the separatist side as well. So while Russia is certainly participating in the war, both indirectly and at times even directly, in my opinion it is not correct to call this a Russo-Ukrainian war. It would be more proper to say it is basically a low-level civil war with very significant outside interference on the part of the Putin government and Russian nationals (on the separatist side) and non-governmental or quasi-governmental agents (on the pro-Kyiv side).

Regarding radicalized nationalism in Ukraine and the potential threats this poses to the country and its neighbors: yes, of course these threats are present. Petro Poroshenko said, when he addressed the Sejm in December 2014, that “we should not make politics over coffins,” meaning that the difficult history between Poland and Ukraine should not become a contemporary...
political matter. But in passing the so-called de-communization laws in April 2015, which among other things valorized the UPA, the Rada did just that. The vote on these laws took place, incidentally, the same day that President Komorowski was in Kyiv to address the Rada—April 9. Poland’s response has been very measured to date. Actually, it has been very measured going all the way back to Yushchenko’s awarding the title Hero of Ukraine, first to Shukhevych in 2007 and later Bandera in 2010. This is understandable, as the Polish state has a vested interest in having a democratic and EU-oriented Ukraine on its border. But such developments have sown discord among ordinary people.

So while we need to recognize that many of the constant media reports of the Euromaidan being orchestrated by fascists and neo-Nazis are clearly Russian propaganda (and how the propaganda machine has been working on both sides in this crisis!), there are indeed unsavory elements involved in Ukrainian politics today, and while in the minority, they can potentially have an outsized influence, especially as much of the “other side” that balanced them was from the Donbas.

But Poland and Ukraine up to this point have been following a very good course concerning dealing with their problematic pasts. This was true under Kravchuk, and under Kuchma, and under Yushchenko, even though Yushchenko was more willing to pander to the radicals. Poles, meanwhile, seem to have realized that what is said by Ukrainian leaders to a domestic audience does not matter as much as how these leaders comport themselves in international affairs. Let us hope this constructive engagement continues under Poroshenko.

Ukraine is dealing with a two-front war. The first front consists of the conflict in Donbas. The second front is concerned with the necessity of introducing fundamental political and economic reforms. Do you think that Ukraine can manage the reforms without overcoming the oligarchy? Can Petro Poroshenko, an oligarch himself, effectively change political and economic systems in Ukraine?

The oligarchs, or to put it more broadly and accurately, entrenched big-business interests and the personal networks of patronage and graft organized around them, are the biggest threat to Ukraine going forward. Even more so than the war in the Donbas. And if this present attempt at reform fails, I’m not sure there will be a third anytime soon.

However, I do believe the oligarchs can be induced to stay more on the political sidelines than they have in recent years in exchange for being incorporated into the new system in such a way that they feel their economic interests are not fundamentally threatened. Indeed, participating in rebuilding the Ukrainian state—provided, of course, they recognize the government in Kyiv and are not predisposed to work against it—can
potentially provide them a way in which to re-write their legacies and obtain a modicum of societal legitimacy. There is a long history of this. We saw this, for example, in the United States with the Robber Barons of the 19th c. At the time, they were reviled. Today their names grace buildings and charitable institutions, and their descendants sit on the boards of major foundations.

But it is going to be difficult to stamp out the deeply rooted day-to-day corruption that exists in Ukraine, both in the state bureaucracy and in business circles. I do not know if Poroshenko is the right man for the job—frankly, I have my doubts given his background. However, it is a hopeful sign that Ukraine's neighbors are proving so willing to help Kyiv in its reform efforts.

Let me conclude by observing that the question of political and economic reform in Ukraine cannot be fully addressed without also thinking about what will happen in eastern Ukraine. I have no idea how or when the fighting will eventually end for good. But as to Russian designs on the region, I do not believe Russia will try to grab any more Ukrainian territory unless something radially changes in either Moscow or Kyiv. Sure, Russia would not refuse a land corridor to Crimea if it could obtain it at a minimal political cost, but this will be impossible. Putin seemed surprised at the reaction from the West over Crimea, and I do not think, at least in the present geo-political climate, he would be eager for any more such adventures.

So if the Donbas is to stay at least nominally a part of Ukraine, the only realistic solution that will not lead to further fighting is a devolution of power from the center. But this will be a tough sell for Kyiv in the next few years. So most likely what we will have is a stalemated conflict and de facto local rule, with Moscow acting as a veto player. This is a role it is good at, having had years to practice in places like Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.

Bio:

George Soroka, PhD, is a Lecturer in the Department of Government at Harvard University. He is also affiliated with Harvard’s Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies. A political scientist, his research interests focus on post-communist regime transitions, comparative democratization, populist movements in Europe, and the politics of history.

Tomasz Stępniewski, Doctor Habilitatus (Polish Academy of Science, Warsaw, Poland) – associate professor at the Institute of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and the Institute of East-Central Europe. Professor Stępniewski was involved in a number of research-projects dealing with the developments in the post-Soviet space while at the same time engaged (by invitation) in expert-level discussions and negotiations on related issues. Former research fellow at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute in 2005, 2006 and 2010, Carnegie Moscow Centre. His main research interests include: the EU’s policy towards its eastern neighbourhood, international relations of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Russia’s policy towards Eastern Europe.