



Three scenarios for Ukraine

by Nicu Popescu

In the last two weeks Ukraine has experienced two major shocks. The Ukrainian revolution was one of the most violent transitions to date, and not just in the post-Soviet space. And the Russian military intervention in Crimea arguably constitutes the biggest European security crisis since the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

These events will continue to be accompanied by competing narratives and conflicting propaganda from both inside and outside Ukraine. But what matters now is how to manage the political fall-out from the crisis and draw the right lessons to prevent a recurrence of similar events in the future. A useful way to consider future policy responses is to organise them around possible scenarios. For Ukraine, there may be at least three: a return to the status quo ante, a 'Transnistriation' of Crimea, and a future with more military interventions.

Status quo ante?

The *status quo ante* would see the return of Crimea to the legal jurisdiction of the Ukrainian state. In this scenario, local authorities in Crimea would accept to be subordinate to Kiev, and local police, border guards and tax authorities would again operate within Ukraine's legal framework. Such a scenario now appears highly unlikely. The moment Russia moved in militarily and disrupted the normal functioning of the Ukrainian state institutions – from the army to police and border guards – there was not much that could be done to reverse this *fait accompli*.

Whereas it took two to three years for the secessionist entities to gradually and painfully secede – *de facto* – from Georgia and Moldova, it took three days for the same to happen in Crimea. In the conflicts of the early 1990s, this process was mostly driven from the bottom-up, with Russia, preoccupied with its own domestic crisis, offering only limited support. In Crimea, the opposite is true. First, Russia sent in troops, and *then* local actors mobilised to dismantle the Ukrainian state institutions in the region. Change was driven by swift and targeted military action that took hours, not years.

A Ukrainian 'Transnistria'?

The second scenario is a 'Transnistriation' of Crimea. Just like Crimea is planning now, Transnistria already held a referendum in 2006 in which 98% of voters opted for joining Russia. Full annexation did not happen, though the region is to a large extent effectively under Russian control.

Again like the secessionist region of Moldova, this implies a *de facto* loss of control and the holding of long and fruitless negotiations over status, coupled with a steady hollowing out of the structures of the state and the consolidation of *de facto* Russian control of the region in political, economic and military terms. State structures in Crimea would therefore refuse to recognise Kiev as a legitimate and higher authority. In order to gain direct access to Crimea and ensure its dominance, Russia would also most likely build

a bridge over the Kerch Strait. In addition, it is likely that Russia would at some point accept OSCE or UN mediation, and push for talks between Crimea and Kiev on power sharing. Throughout these negotiations, Russia would maintain its stance that, while it supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine, it is up to Kiev and Simferopol to sort out their differences. In the case of Transnistria, such a process has lasted 22 years and has not brought the conflicting parties any closer to finding a solution.

This scenario would suit Russia quite well. It would not place too great a strain on Russian coffers, and Moscow can certainly afford, and is even willing, to subsidise Crimea. If faced with external diplomatic pressures, it can always blame the Crimeans for the lack of progress. In the event that Kiev moves towards NATO and potentially the EU, Moscow always has the options of either recognising the independence of or even annexing Crimea. And Russia would be in a position to keep any Ukrainian government in check, waiting for various geopolitical concessions in exchange for progress on conflict settlement in Crimea.

This model has been tried and tested by Russia in Transnistria – and it has worked well. It costs little and, potentially, brings wider geopolitical benefits. Yet this may be neither the worst-case scenario nor the most likely one.

A future of interventions?

If Moscow is not seriously reprimanded for its actions in Crimea, there is nothing to prevent it from doing something similar again in the future. Only one month ago, few thought that Russia could launch an unprovoked invasion of a neighbouring country. If such interventions can occur without any significant consequences, there will be little to deter Moscow from embarking on further military ventures in Ukraine itself (again) or other post-Soviet countries.

Of course, the 2008 Russia-Georgia war was a warning that Moscow considers full-scale military invasions as a possible foreign policy tool. But as Russia and Georgia are both perceived to have played a role in the escalation of their disputes, there was a certain degree of shared responsibility for the militarisation of the conflict. But in the case of Crimea, guilt cannot be attributed to the Ukrainians: not a single Russian was killed in the region and the only Russian who died in a political context in Ukraine in recent weeks – as Kadri Liik noted – was killed by sniper fire during the protests on Maidan Square.

Unless there are some tangible and lasting losses for Russia – beyond several months of relative diplomatic isolation – Putin may well end up in a stronger position. The seizure of Crimea has boosted his domestic standing, even among groups that have traditionally opposed him, such as communists or ultra-nationalists. Putin also believes that it is his responsibility to reverse the disintegration of the USSR wherever possible – and Crimea is a powerful symbol in honouring that historical duty. Finally, keeping *de facto* control of Crimea is another plus. Not only is it a valuable asset in itself, but it also acts as a constraint on the foreign policy options of any future Ukrainian government.

A few cancelled summits, followed by a presumed normalisation in a year or so, will not seriously affect Moscow. The behaviour of the Russian stock market was indicative of this: it suffered on the first Monday after the intervention, but had almost fully recovered within a couple of days. Putin is certain that his country's diplomatic standing will recover quickly, too. Once this occurs, the president may ask himself 'why not try this tactic again?'

Military ventures such as this in Crimea may entail risks, but they also may pay off handsomely. Opportunities and possible pretexts for such future ventures in the post-Soviet space abound. If, in the end, the situation in Crimea works out in Putin's favour, what prevents a similar military takeover of other parts of eastern Ukraine or even Odessa, Ukraine's biggest port situated roughly half an hour from Transnistria where 1300 Russian soldiers are stationed? Perhaps a succession crisis will occur in a post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan, in which political violence leads to Russia moving in to 'protect' its compatriots. If a deterioration of the economic situation in Azerbaijan leads to a possible stand-off between the country's current rulers and protesters, could Russia move to ensure that north Azerbaijan is not affected by the 'instability' affecting the rest of the country?

Any of these worrying scenarios are quite conceivable following what has happened in Crimea. To minimise the chances of such scenarios materialising, Russia's actions may have to be met with responses that go beyond mere diplomatic signals. As the 6 March EU summit conclusions clearly state, the future of EU-Russia relations is now dependent on Russia's actions in Ukraine.

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