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The Conflict between Russia and Ukraine

Introduction

The history of the Russian and Ukrainian conflict is long and complex. Ukraine has, for over three centuries, fought to attain and maintain status as an independent state.[1] However, continued chaos in Eastern Europe fueled by a number of battles and wars (namely the World Wars) has permitted the former Soviet Union to maintain a sense of control over Ukraine, or at least the region on the border of Russia known as Crimea. Upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, fifteen of the former Soviet Republics, including Ukraine, were granted status as independent states, or formerly referred to as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).[2] The Ukrainians adopted a democratic system and elected their own president, and a coalition government to lead the diverse cultural and ethnic population of the Member State.[3]

However, throughout Eastern Europe and particularly in Russia, a high level of resentment remains as to how the post-World War II borderlines were drawn.[4] A majority of Russians still view Ukraine as a state belonging to Russia, particularly the region of Crimea with its historical significance for Russia dating back to the 1500s.[5] This dispute over Crimea has led to local political contention, uprisings, and international showings of force between the powers of the East and West. This discord is further compounded by economic crisis, martial law, and the existence of nuclear weapons in the surrounding region.

The dispute between Russia and Ukraine over the Crimea region is one of the most significant safety and humanitarian crises facing the world today. Hundreds of years of disagreement have resulted in significant loss of life and continue to threaten the global distribution of power. The last decade, and particularly the last five years, have seen an increase in tensions between the two Member States, further qualifying the need for this conflict to be addressed and resolved.

Annexation of Crimea

In 2013, the government of Ukraine was poised to sign a deal with the European Union (EU) which would have provided Ukrainian access to EU markets and set the Member State on a path to potential EU membership.[6] This budding deal was a threat to the already tense relationship between Ukraine and Russia. At the time Russia remained Ukraine's largest trading partner and its closest neighbor.[7] Despite the public statements made by Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych to sign the deal, Ukraine ultimately withdrew from the agreement.[8] This resulted in what would come to be known as the Maidan Revolution – protests in the streets of Ukraine, the fleeing of President Yanukovych to Russia (supported by Russian special forces), and an attempt to control the riots by police enforcement which resulted in the death of 130 Ukrainians.[9]

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[1] "Ukraine Profile," BBC News. March 7, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18010123
[2] Thieme, Donald, "A Brief History of the Conflict in Ukraine," USNI News. March 11, 2014.
      https://news.usni.org/2014/03/11/brief-history-conflict-ukraine
[3] Thieme, Donald, "A Brief History of the Conflict in Ukraine."
[4] Thieme, Donald, "A Brief History of the Conflict in Ukraine."
[5] Thieme, Donald, "A Brief History of the Conflict in Ukraine."
[6] Vasilyeva, Natalyia, "Russia's Conflict with Ukraine: An Explainer," Associated Press. November 26, 2018.
      https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/11/26/russias-conflict-with-ukraine-an-explainer/
[7] "Ukraine Profile," BBC News.
[8] "Ukraine Profile," BBC News.
[9] Vasilyeva, Natalyia, "Russia's Conflict with Ukraine: An Explainer."

Following the culmination of these events, in February of 2014, the opposition party (constituted mostly of protestors) took control of the Ukrainian government.[10] Russian President Vladmir Putin saw this as a direct threat the Russian heritage in Ukraine and deployed both Russian officials and unidentified Russian troops to the Crimean Peninsula.[11] These Russian officers forced the annexation of Crimea to Russia, prompting the most significant showdown between the East and the West since the Cold War and leading to continually intensifying outbursts of violence between Ukrainians and Russians.[12]

Immediately following the annexation of Crimea, the United States of America and the EU imposed harsh economic sanctions on Russia.[13] However, this did little to resolve the conflict, as battles between the two Member States continued. Pro-Russian armed groups seized Ukrainian towns on the Russian border in April of 2014, to which the Ukrainian government responded with a military deployment to the region.[14] Further escalating matters, Ukraine elected Petro Poroshenko, a pro-Western businessman campaigning on a call to increase ties with the West, to the presidency in May of 2014.[15] Finally, in September of 2015, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) confirmed that Russian troops armed with heavy artillery had been deployed to Eastern Ukraine, beyond Crimea alone.[16]

Continued War in Ukraine

Violence within Ukraine is not limited solely to the Crimean Peninsula. Since its annexation, more than 10,000 people have been killed and over 1.7 million displaced.[17] Moreover, aid agencies estimate that 4.4 million people are being directly and significantly impacted by the ongoing hostilities, 3.8 million of whom are in need of urgent assistance.[18] Warring separatist factions within the state of Ukraine are in large part to blame, with different regions of the state claiming allegiance to either the Russian or Ukrainian government.[19] The primary conflict region between Ukrainians and Russian-backed separatists lies near the town of Avdiivka, which has been the target of routine mortar bombings since the conflict's initial escalation in 2015.[20] This is only one of many small industrial Ukrainian towns threatened by continued escalation.

Under President Poroshenko's rule, Ukraine has built an army to respond to both the warring separatist factions and the Russian infiltration within the Member State.[21] Further, Ukraine has bolstered its ties with the West, formally joining the European Union in July of 2017.[22] In 2018, Ukraine manifested its declaration to break all ties with Russia by seeking independence for its Orthodox church and was granted permission to create its own Orthodox branch independent of Russian Orthodox permission.[23] This engagement was particularly decried by both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin (the Russian parliamentary institution), but celebrated in the West as a sign of further separation between Ukraine and Russia, and ultimately a decrease in Russian power over the region.[24] Most recently, the tensions between the two Member States have been primarily founded in maritime disputes. In May of 2018, President Putin opened a bridge across the Kerch Straight linking southern Russia to the Crimean Peninsula, an action disputed by the Ukrainians and viewed as highly illegal without agreement of both parties.[25] In response, the Ukrainian government issued sanctions against Russian companies, namely banking groups that

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[10] "Ukraine Profile," BBC News.
[11] Vasilyeva, Natalyia, "Russia's Conflict with Ukraine: An Explainer."
[12] "Ukraine Profile," BBC News.
[13] "Ukraine Profile," BBC News.
[14] Vasilyeva, Natalyia, "Russia's Conflict with Ukraine: An Explainer."
[15] Motyl, Alexander. "Ukraine's Poroshenko Paradox," Foreign Policy, March 19, 2019.
     https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/19/ukraines-poroshenko-paradox/
[16] Vasilyeva, Natalyia, "Russia's Conflict with Ukraine: An Explainer."
[17] Coman, Julian. "On the frontline of Europe's forgotten war in Ukraine," The Guardian, November 12, 2017.
     https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/12/ukraine-on-the-front-line-of-europes-forgotten-war
[18] Coman, Julian. "On the frontline of Europe's forgotten war in Ukraine."
[19] Coman, Julian. "On the frontline of Europe's forgotten war in Ukraine."
[20] Coman, Julian. "On the frontline of Europe's forgotten war in Ukraine."
[21] Motyl, Alexander. "Ukraine's Poroshenko Paradox."
[22] "Ukraine Profile," BBC News.
[23] Vasilyeva, Natalyia, "Russia's Conflict with Ukraine: An Explainer."
[24] "Ukraine Profile," BBC News.
[25] "Ukraine Profile," BBC News.

operate in the region.[26] When a cargo vessel owned by one of these banking groups attempted to transport goods from Russia to Ukraine in August 2018, the ship was detained by the Ukrainian government citing a violation of sanctions.[27] Russia retaliated by increasing military presence in the area, disrupting trade by inspecting all cargo traveling to or from Ukrainian ports, and engaging in what the Ukrainian government calls an "economic blockade."[28] In November and December of 2018, Russian forces opened fire on Ukrainian vessels in the Straight, resulting in international discussions about the need for intervention. However, no decisive action was taken at the international level at that time.[29]

Conclusion

On the brink of a Presidential election in Ukraine which will likely result in a stronger pro-Western government than before, and with continuous upsurge of violence between separatist factions as well as Ukrainian and Russian forces, it is only a matter of time before this long-running dispute further endangers the lives of innocent bystanders. In the five years since the annexation of Crimea, millions of Russian and Ukrainian lives have been impacted. With nearly two million people displaced and increased death tolls, it is up to the international community to step in and find a solution to bring an end to this security and humanitarian crisis. If the crisis continues to be "Europe's forgotten war," it is guaranteed that the threat to human lives and the balance of power will only grow.[30]

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[26] Chumakova, Natalia, and Natalie Zinets, "Some Russian Ships stop cargoes to Ukraine after tanker detained," Reuters. August 15, 2018. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-ukraine-shipping/some-russian-ships-stop-cargoes-to-ukraine-after-tanker-detained-sources-idUSKBN1L01GS

[27] Chumakova, Natalia, and Natalie Zinets, "Some Russian Ships stop cargoes to Ukraine after tanker detained."

[28] Vasilyeva, Natalyia, "Russia's Conflict with Ukraine: An Explainer."

[29] Vasilyeva, Natalyia, "Russia's Conflict with Ukraine: An Explainer."

[30] Coman, Julian. "On the frontline of Europe's forgotten war in Ukraine."