

Is the Ukraine war a “civil war”?



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by Lev Tsitrin

Yes, I know that it is unwise to discuss religion and politics with friends. But agreeing with a good advice, and following it are two very different things – at least for me. Hence, whenever I talk to my Russian friends, the conversation inevitably turns to Ukraine. This is perfectly fine when everyone is on the same page, each providing further examples in support of the points we all agree on. But such is not always the case; I have a friend who has a very different view

of the conflict than mine – and the difference came into full view in two recent conversations in which his casual reference to Ukraine events as a “civil war” and my equally casual dismissal of that notion suddenly fired him up. The subject dominated the rest of the conversation; he kept providing new and yet newer argument for his position – and then called again to press further points. His very vehemence told me that I must have touched a raw nerve, and that therein perhaps lies the key to understanding the conflict, if not to resolving it. Yet, there was a glaring, unspoken gap between what he said, and why he said it, the “why,” it seems to me, being of far greater importance than the “what” for understanding the war.

What he said was simple enough, and sensible enough: from the time immemorial (i.e. for the last 350 years or so) Ukraine was the part of Russia – be it Russian Empire, or the Soviet Union. Ethnic origins, mentalities, cultures and languages are close or closely intertwined (I’m sure Ukrainians will hotly debate each of those points; I didn’t, being totally ignorant in such matters); marriages between Russians and Ukrainians are common (which is true), lots of Russians live in Ukraine, and lots of Ukrainians live in Russia (also true); so how is Russia-Ukraine war not a civil war?

Why he was saying it was left unsaid, but became obvious in his explosive reaction to my counter-question with which I dismissed all of the above as irrelevant: did Russia cross internationally-agreed border? If the answer is a “no,” this is a civil war; if “yes,” it is an international conflict.

To the friend of mine, this was a non-starter, a distinction without a difference. To him, neither the disposition of international law, nor the geography of international borders made any difference.

And this mindset, I suspect, is what drives people in the Kremlin. To me, by far the most surprising aspect of this war is that both Mr. Putin, and his past successor/predecessor Mr.

Medvedev are lawyers by training, and thus should have instinctively known that the forcible absorption of Ukraine into Russia that started in 2014 in Crimea was an international conflict, and not an internecine war. They still prefer not to notice this. Hence in their mind, NATO is not engaged in a legitimate support of a country fighting to maintain its independence when it supplies arms to Ukraine, but it inadmissibly interferes in Russia's domestic affairs – hence, Putin's insistence that in Ukraine Russia is fighting off NATO aggression, rather than trying to conquer Ukraine.

Inhabitants of the Kremlin live inside a mental time machine parked in the past – the past in which Russian borders enclosed much more of the Eastern Europe than they do now. The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the resulting independence of its fifteen constituent republics has not been internalized. The mental border is not where the international border is – and that is the root of the problem.

Back at the time of the Soviet Union, the international travel was reserved for the well-connected. People who have been abroad were envied as some superior creatures – but divided into two different classes of prestige: those who managed to visit the “socialist” countries, and the “capitalist” ones (it was far easier to get a tourist package to visit a Soviet-block country). Out of envy, the jaded Russians who could not travel, came up with a grapes-are-sour rime that dismissed the social glamor of those who visited a “socialist” country: “chicken is not a bird – Poland is not abroad” (it rimes much better in its original Russian; I translated it the best I could.) Poland being nowadays a part of NATO, this is no longer true; but Kremlin's inhabitants apparently cannot reconcile themselves to the fact that “Ukraine is abroad” – and indeed, for half of their lives it literally wasn't. The border between Russia and Ukraine not registering in their minds, the war is to them, indeed, a civil war – a “special military operation” fought inside their borders, that is.

But it is not so for the rest of the world – at least to that part of the world where legalities still matter, and the armed crossing of international borders is considered an act of aggression, to be condemned and countered. No one in the West sees the war waged in Ukraine as a “civil war” – and the collective West reacted accordingly, by helping Ukraine maintain its independence via sending it defensive arms (and now promising it light armored vehicles to boot, in a vote of confidence for Ukrainian ability to conduct offensive operations that are needed to fully liberate its territory).

This difference, I suspect, is the hidden reason why my friend instinctively and vehemently rejected the very idea that the conflict in Ukraine is anything but a civil war. Else, it is a naked aggression – and he cannot bring himself to admit that this is what Russia is doing. He has to find excuses – and what better excuse there is than that this is an inter-Slavic affair from which the West should stay away, that it is a mere long-simmering family dispute that suddenly exploded into a brawl – in other words, that it is a civil war in which outsiders should not get involved. Thus, Russia’s behavior is turned into something excusable – and even justifiable.

Not only do I beg to differ, but I suspect that calling it a “civil war” is a thinly disguised way of saying “I think that what Russia is doing is justified,” while seeing it as an international conflict is tantamount to supporting Ukraine. This is what, ultimately, caused the fireworks in our discussion. Our positions suddenly became crystal-clear – and, what is worse, we turned out to root for the opposite sides in the conflict. I haven’t heard from this friend since; hopefully, we will remain friends. If not, it would not only be sad, but serve me as a yet another confirmation that one should not discuss politics with friends. Oh well. Easier said than done...