

FRONTLINE UKRAINE: CRISIS IN THE BORDERLANDS BY RICHARD SAKWA (LONDON, I.B. TAURIS, 2015)

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The great powers remain the primary actors in international relations in the modern world. This is proved by the continuous competition between them for spheres of influence. The great powers possess political and diplomatic, as well as military and economic strength which may cause the rest of the world to take into consideration their interests. This is also true in the case of Ukraine when the crisis of 2013-2014 brought the world to the edge of a new Cold War. On the one hand, Ukraine has an important geopolitical position which gives it the opportunity to maneuver, but on the other, Ukraine has to consider the great powers' opinions before taking action of its own. It is in Russia's interest to maintain Ukraine within its sphere of its influence – political, economic and cultural. The European Union, however, is tending to gradually attract Ukraine into its structure through the creation of a political association and free trade area.

In the book *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, the author Richard Sakwa examines the causes of present crisis in Ukraine which is centered on the disputed territory of Crimea and the eastern regions of Donbass. Richard Sakwa is Professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent, United Kingdom. He writes books about Russian and Eastern European communist and post-communist politics. He is also the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union* (1999), *Putin: Russia's Choice* (2007), and *Russian Politics and Society* (2008). In his most recent book, he follows the origins, developments and significance of the conflict from the protests in Kiev until the parliamentary elections of October 2014. He describes the conflict as the result of two interacting processes: an internal conflict over the nature of the Ukrainian state, and an external contest for influence over its future.

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In the introduction and first chapter the author provides a brief background to the Ukrainian crisis and important moments from its history. He indicates that for centuries Ukraine has always been a source of rivalry between strong neighbors who competed for its land. And that in the modern era, the country has enjoyed only a brief period of statehood following the collapse of Russian empire in 1917. According to many Russians, Ukraine and Russia are just two components of a single civilization, Ukrainians, though, argue that their country long ago set out on its own path of development. Based on these opinions the author shows that there are two models of Ukrainian statehood, and ultimately the Ukrainian crisis (2013-2014) represented a battle between the two. The first model is driven by the idea of Ukraine as a nation state, officially monolingual, culturally autonomous from Russia, aligned with Europe and the Atlantic community. The second is the idea of Ukraine as state nation, an assemblage of different traditions, where Russian is recognized as a second language and economic, social and cultural links with Russia are maintained.

In the next chapters the author analyzes the international context of the Ukrainian crisis with the help of the concept of “Two Europes” (Chapter 2); namely, “the Wider” and “the Greater”. He believes that the first, based on the model of Western democracy, is expanding eastwards, assisted by NATO, and has an anti-Russian orientation. The second entails a concept of Europe that stretches “from Lisbon to Vladivostok”, the “common European home” that was defined by Charles de Gaulle and Mikhail Gorbachev during their times. He defends the second version (that is, the “continental” concept of Europe) and criticizes wider Europe. Sakwa states that the conflicts in the post-Soviet space should be explained by the aggressive expansion of the Western model eastwards which culminated in the Ukrainian crisis.

The author shows that the European Union’s attempts to draw Ukraine into its orbit were instrumental in tipping the country into conflict. He stresses that the misguided policies of the European Union and its inability to take decisions about European affairs independently of the United States are the key reasons that the crisis in Ukraine remains unresolved. Therefore, in his opinion, steps towards further development of the EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) – intended to absorb former soviet countries in the borderlands between the EU and Russia – were counterproductive. He indicates that nowhere was this dilemma felt more than in Ukraine. The other post-soviet countries are also potential conflict hotspots.

The author indicates that the Ukrainian crisis cannot be understood unless the evolution of Russian thinking is analyzed. He cites publications by Russian writers such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who advocated for the creation of a Russian union with Ukraine as its heart. Solzhenitsyn wrote that “Ukraine

matters to Russia as an issue of survival, quite apart from a thousand years of shared history and civilization.” (p.75)

Despite the many interesting facts, the author presents a one-sided interpretation of Russian politics which contains contradictory arguments. On the one hand, he argues that Europe has become “hostage to a faraway country” (i.e. Ukraine). But on the other hand, he defends the concept of “the Greater Europe” (the idea of an extended Europe which includes Russia). The author identifies Eastern European countries as being responsible for anti-Russian sanctions. He favors Russian foreign policy and argues that Russia under Vladimir Putin is not a land-grabbing state but a conservative power whose activities are designed to maintain the status quo. In his opinion, Russia is constantly defending itself against an offensive West, and the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 was in effect the first of the wars intended to stop NATO enlargement, while the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 was the second.

As for the Russian annexation of the Crimea, the author’s attitude is characterized by understanding and attempts at justification. In his opinion, Russia was forced into both the annexation of Crimea and opposition to the Kiev government due to perceived aggression and threatening behavior on the part of NATO, the EU and Ukraine. The author leaves out reference to the role of Russia and the action it played in escalating the conflict in Ukraine. In particular, he ignores the impact of Vladimir Putin’s presidency and the subsequent dramatic weakening of Russian opposition, civil society and the media. The more authoritarian approach of the Russian political elite has contributed to the country’s aggressive reaction to events in Ukraine. How the West and Ukraine have failed to handle the crisis is the key focus of the book.

To sum up, in the book *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* the author Richard Sakwa goes into the history and society, as well as the domestic and foreign policy, of Ukraine. He describes the Ukrainian crisis as a complex problem which did not develop out of nowhere. He points out that it originated in a geopolitical contest, critical problems with administration, corruption, and a weak democracy, as well as in the country’s cultural, regional and ethnic diversity. In his opinion, this led to regime change in Kiev, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the armed conflict in the region of Donbass.

The book contains many valuable facts and reflections about current Ukrainian-Russian relations, but lacks a significant degree of objectivity. It largely places the blame for the conflict on the countries of the West and Ukraine itself, while Russia’s role is justified and rationalized. However, the book can be recommended to social scientists, as well as anyone else who is interested in reading about Ukrainian-Russian relations and the Ukrainian crisis of 2013-2014.