

Ukraine, Instability, and the US Election - No Way Out?

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[War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [UKRAINE REPORT](#)

Headline: Ukraine claims Russian invasion possible 'at any minute'

Of course this sensationalized claim is as true as it is empty. A possible invasion has been as true for decades as it is now, and it will be just as true as long as Russia and Ukraine share a border (currently almost 1,000 miles long). Since September 2014, Ukraine has been [building "Project Wall"](#) along about 110 miles of the Russian border, an admitted "jobs project" reminiscent of [the Maginot Line](#) of the 1930s between France and Germany. But a possible invasion is a far cry from an imminent invasion, and a farther cry from an actual invasion, neither of which is shouted among the current cries of wolf in the region.

More realistically, reports from Ukraine in early August suggest that the long-simmering, chronic near-crisis there, while perhaps warming a degree or two, remains a long-simmering, chronic near-crisis (or perhaps, as some optimists suggest, [a "frozen conflict"](#)). For now, the unstable stasis of Ukraine seems to suit the needs of the major players – Russia and the U.S./NATO – if not the people actually on the ground in Ukraine, slowly being ground up by the unbroken hostilities of a broken culture. Geopolitically, the structure of peace in Ukraine seems to have more fault lines than support members. This has been true for many years, so maybe the rickety construction will continue to hold, however shakily – until the parties find the will to settle their differences somewhat rationally, or until someone decides to kick out the jams.

The only constant in the Ukrainian meta-construct is that the country is and remains a shaky buffer against direct confrontation between the world's two most deadly nuclear-armed states.



The perimeter of Independence Square, known as Maidan in Kiev in 2014. (photo: Brendan Hoffman/Getty Images) [go to original article](#)

The headline shown above is [from the Irish Times](#), over a story quoting unnamed sources in the Kiev government, who in turn quote unnamed sources in Crimea. Nothing in the story, taken as a whole, supports the fearmongering headline. Even Kiev acknowledges that Russian troop movements are exercises, of unstated scale at an unstated distance from the border. Even less ominously, Kiev reported that the Russians closed several (not all) Ukraine-Crimea border crossings along the 114-mile border, then reopened them after several hours, for unstated reasons.

Reporting the same news, the American propaganda outlet [Radio Free Europe](#) (RFE) based its story on reports from unnamed “Crimean Tatar activists” who said some border crossings were closed and undefined but “unusually large concentrations of Russian hardware” were seen in the northern region. RFE also quoted Nariman Celal (or Dzhelalov) describing movement of equipment but not troops, also reported by the Crimean Human Rights Group. And RFE quoted a Tatar member of Ukraine’s parliament and member of the Poroshenko Solidarity Party, [Refat Chubarov, a Crimean Tatar exile](#) since 1968, as saying the Russian activities appeared to be a training exercise. In the past, [Chubarov has described Crimea](#) as a territory of fear for Tatars: “they are prosecuted, sentenced on fabricated charges, forced to leave their land.”

Luhansk assassination attempt 350 miles from Crimea

During the past year, in the breakaway provinces of eastern Ukraine, several rebel commanders have been killed in attacks similar to the [August 6 roadside bombing](#) that injured Igor Plotnitsky, the head of the Luhansk People’s Republic since 2014, and two guards riding in the same car. A [third guard was killed](#). Plotnitsky was hospitalized with reportedly severe liver and spleen damage, but was reportedly in stable condition on the evening of the bombing. Luhansk authorities blamed the attack on Ukrainian and Western intelligence agencies. Kiev denied involvement. Plotnitsky himself blamed the U.S. [in an online audio](#):

I am alive and healthy. The war is not over, and behind the Ukrainian government are the intelligence services of the U.S., those who try to roil the situation in Ukraine and in the world in general.

Since declaring independence in 2014, Luhansk has reportedly had an internal power struggle among various factions. Nevertheless, Plotnitsky helped shape the 2015 Minsk peace agreement that achieved an erratic cease-fire and reduced fighting in the region. According to the [Moscow correspondent of the Los Angeles Times](#):

Shortly after declaring independence [in 2014], Luhansk split into several warring enclaves that were controlled by Cossacks, far-right nationalists and other pro-Russia forces. Plotnitsky consolidated control by removing and exiling his opponents whose supporters accused him of trying to assassinate them. Two of Plotnitsky’s main rivals were killed last year [2015] in car explosions. Plotnitsky’s advisor was gunned down in April.

The attack on Plotnitsky comes in the midst of increased violence in the Donbas region, with reports of armed [combat and increased shelling](#) on both sides of the ceasefire line established by the [Minsk agreement of February 2015](#). Reporting the highest level of civilian casualties in a year, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, [reported on August 3](#):

The escalation of hostilities and the accompanying civilian casualties in eastern Ukraine over the last two months are very worrying. Civilians are once again having to flee to improvised bomb shelters in their basements, sometimes overnight, with increasing frequency – the price of the ceasefire violations is too high for the women, men and children in eastern Ukraine....

The many casualties we have documented in recent weeks suggest that neither Ukrainian

forces nor the armed groups are taking the necessary precautions to protect civilians. We urge all sides to respect the ceasefire provisions, to remove combatants and weapons from civilian areas, and to scrupulously implement the provisions of the Minsk Agreements.

The UN High Commissioner also called on the Kiev government to act on its promise to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Since the Rome Statute provides for personal, individual accountability for criminal actions, the commissioner argued, its adoption will increase incentive for all parties to act lawfully and protect civilians.

According to an Associated Press report on August 6, “the worst of the fighting in eastern Ukraine [is] now over,” having the effect of releasing a flood of weapons into the rest of Ukraine, creating a “supermarket” for millions of illegal weapons. Crimes committed with guns have more than doubled since 2014. Weapons are also reportedly being smuggled to Europe and to the Middle East. Ukraine has classified all information it has on illegal arms trade.

U.S. shadow war with Russia quietly escalates in smallish increments

After twenty years of stealth aggression, U.S./NATO efforts provoked the Ukrainian coup that drove Russian ally and Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich out of office and out of the country. Facing a hostile takeover of a country on the Russian border, Russian president Vladimir Putin took over Crimea and incorporated it into Russia, which a majority of Crimeans may have preferred, rather than remaining part of a hostile and chaotic Ukraine. If U.S./NATO apparatchiks saw that coming in the wake of their coup, they had no effective plan to head it off, and the ensuing “that’s-not-fair” tantrum by the stymied West is what we’ve had to live with ever since. Russia continues to integrate Crimea into Russia. The U.S./NATO forces continue to [bring military threats to Russia’s European borders](#). This is a quiet cold war, but just as dangerous as the original Cold War.

Since 2014, the U.S. has spent more than \$600 million in Ukraine just training the National Guard and the Armed Forces, according to U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Michael Carpenter. The U.S. is also the [largest donor of military equipment](#) to Ukraine, more than \$117 million since 2014 (out of a total of \$164.1 million from all donors combined). Affirming that these supplies and training are part of continuing Western pressure on Russia by bringing a neighboring state [into the NATO military alliance](#), Carpenter also indicated the [Ukrainian forces remain substandard](#):

They still have a lot of work ahead. Especially, if Ukraine wants to create a new army, compatible with NATO forces, by 2020. This requires a lot of efforts put into structural reorganization, logistics reform, military health system etc.

There are U.S. troops in Ukraine at any given moment, in the hundreds if not thousands, moving in and out with different missions, making any reliable count a transient fact. The Russians also have troops in Crimea, which they consider Russia. And there are likely Russian troops and/or irregulars in eastern Ukraine, present at the behest of the disputed current governments. (A year ago, Ukraine was citing Russian forces on both sides of the Ukraine border as evidence of imminent war, as [reported by the Independent](#), like the Irish Times’ war “at any minute” this year.)

The U.S. commander of NATO [frets about the Russians’ ability](#) to move troops more quickly than NATO can, comparing recent training exercises (and assuming what the general says is

true). This is designed to raise fear of the Russians. But in the Alice-in-Wonderland world of NATO stealth aggression, there is an unspoken assumption that Russian maneuvers within Russian borders are far more threatening than U.S. troop movements on Russia's borders, some 5,000 miles from Washington. In this Washington wonderland, somehow it makes sense for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to continue its 15-year-long war in Afghanistan, which is not really that close to the North Atlantic.

What happens if the U.S./NATO forces just stop advancing?

So we have a presidential election underway, right? That means there's a possibility of power shifting to saner heads than we've seen since 1992, at least in theory. So what have the candidates been saying?

Hillary Clinton has called Putin a bully and said she's stood up to him in the past. She doesn't talk much about her role as Secretary of State when she chose [Dick Cheney puppet Victoria Nuland](#) to stir up the catastrophic Ukraine coup that has brought us to the present unstable mess. Still to be sorted out are the donations Ukrainian [oligarchs made to the Clinton Foundation](#) before Mrs. Clinton helped destabilize the country. In an [ironic prelude to recent hacking accusations](#) in the current campaign, back in 2011 Secretary Clinton accused Putin of rigging his election and he accused her of meddling in Russian politics. In 2014, Clinton compared Putin's annexation of Crimea to Adolf Hitler's 1938 unopposed occupation of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. The comparison is as politically raw as it is historically distorted, but never mind, Hitler analogies are useful as a measure of the desperation of their users. [Colin Powell's former chief of staff](#), Lawrence Wilkerson, is concerned that Clinton sees war as "the first instrument of choice." If Clinton has any plans to defuse the U.S.-Russian confrontation, she's kept them well hidden.

Almost a year ago, Donald [Trump told a conference on Ukraine](#) that the Russians invaded Ukraine because "there is no respect for the United States.... Putin does not respect our President whatsoever." He said it was Europe's problem to clean up the mess, about which he has showed no comprehension, saying it didn't matter to him whether or not Ukraine was in NATO. More recently Trump, apparently meaning something else, said that Putin is "not going into Ukraine, OK, just so you understand. He's not going into Ukraine, all right, you can mark it down." That makes sense if one assumes that Crimea is a fait accompli and that Putin has no desire to embrace the fractious chaos of the rest of Ukraine (beyond maintaining the irritant of Donbas independence)." Of course Trump did not explain it that way, or any other coherent way.

What's interesting here is that the worse candidate, in his inchoate and apparently mindless way, is stumbling down a road that could lead to peace. The more experienced candidate appears to remain determinedly committed to a course that leads inevitably, sooner or later, to a nuclear confrontation. No wonder Russians are saying, [according to USA Today](#), that Trump's "rude jokes and fun is like a fresh breeze" and that Trump would be more likely than Clinton to improve U.S.-Russian relations.

And even less wonder that a former CIA director and deputy director is castigating Trump and endorsing Clinton. The CIA has such a wonderful record of alerting the President to bin Laden, affirming WMDs in Iraq, promising the success of the Ukrainian coup, and preventing the rise of the Islamic State, among its peak accomplishments. [Michael Morrell, CIA 1980-2013](#), published an August 5 Op-Ed in The New York Times headlined: "I ran the C.I.A. Now I'm endorsing Hillary Clinton." That's a mixed notice well calculated to exacerbate

cognitive dissonance, or in more colloquial terms: That's a joke, right?

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