

What Obama Can Do to Save Ukraine

Exclusive: The fate of Ukraine whether it descends into civil war or finds a path back from the brink may rest with President Obama and whether he can work with Russian President Putin while recognizing the legitimate concerns of both eastern and western Ukrainians, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If President Barack Obama is to help defuse the worsening crisis in Ukraine, he will have to show a level of leadership on foreign policy that he has not demonstrated in his five-plus years in office. In particular, he will have to repudiate the one-sided narrative that has been created by his own State Department and the mainstream U.S. media.

Obama will have to recognize the complex reality of Ukraine, a society deeply divided between the west and east, and acknowledge that the U.S.-backed Maidan revolt overthrowing elected President Viktor Yanukovich was indeed spearheaded by neo-Nazi militias who continue to brutalize political opponents, including the May 2 massacre in Odessa that killed dozens of ethnic Russians.

What makes Obama's position so politically difficult in the United States is that the political/media elite has adopted a narrative that excludes the nasty reality of what has actually occurred in Ukraine over the past six months. Instead, the simplistic U.S. narrative made first Yanukovich and then Russian President Vladimir Putin the cardboard villains, and conversely, the Maidan protesters the idealistic heroes.

The black-hat/white-hat narrative has systematically distorted the depiction of Ukraine reaching the American people. So, Obama would have to start back at the beginning and explain how the U.S.-backed regime in Kiev is not all sweetness and light and how the ethnic Russians in the east, who were the political base for Yanukovich, are not just mindless pawns of Moscow.

Not only would Obama have to come down off the U.S. "high horse" and admit that his own administration has been guilty of spinning the facts waging "information warfare" but he'd have to recognize that Putin's cooperation is essential to bringing this increasingly bloody crisis under control. Obama would also have to admit that Putin was not the cause of the Ukraine mess.

That would challenge a powerful "group think" in Washington that has formed around the idea that the Ukraine crisis is just a Putin ploy to reclaim land lost when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. To believe that conspiracy theory, however, one has to suspend all sense of logic.

For Putin to have created the Ukraine crisis, he covertly would have had to get the European Union to dangle an unrealistic offer of membership to Ukraine, then get the International Monetary Fund to demand draconian "reforms" that forced Yanukovich to back away, then arrange massive demonstrations in the Maidan in support of a European future, then organize neo-Nazi militias to carry out the putsch, and then just pretend to help his ally Yanukovich survive while really having engaged in this grandiose scheme to drive him from office.

The fact that supposedly serious thinkers in Washington are even suggesting such a preposterous analysis indicates how far the political/media elite in Washington has strayed from sanity, a process that has been underway for decades but has accelerated in the neocon-dominated era since the run-up to the Iraq War.

Whose Disinformation?

One of the worst offenders in this deviation from reality has been the New York Times, whose coverage of Ukraine must be read like you might read a newspaper in a totalitarian society, gleaning a few facts here and there but understanding that they have been assembled as propaganda, not truth.

For instance, on Tuesday, the Times offered up this example of biased journalism: "The [Ukraine] government seemed to be stepping up its efforts to counter the pro-Russian disinformation campaign that has flooded the television airwaves in the country's east and portrayed the central authorities as illegitimate. [Acting President Oleksandr] Turchynov's office released a number of statements, including one that criticized efforts by those it called terrorists to enlist miners from eastern Ukraine in antigovernment actions."

So, the Times has determined as flat-fact that the TV news reaching eastern Ukraine is "pro-Russian disinformation," citing as the only example the portrayal of the Kiev regime as "illegitimate." But the question of legitimacy is not a question of fact but of opinion.

And, there is no factual doubt that Yanukovich was ousted via extra-constitutional means. There was a violent takeover of government buildings by neo-Nazi militias on Feb. 22 and there was no impeachment that followed the provisions of the Ukrainian constitution. Indeed, much of the constitutional court which is supposed to have a role in an impeachment was disbanded in the coup.

I was told by one senior international diplomat who was on the scene that after the Feb. 22 putsch, Western officials scrambled to help the shaken parliament cobble together a new government to avoid having a bunch of unsavory right-wing

thugs become the de facto rulers of Kiev. The niceties of constitutional order were thrown out the window amid the crisis.

However, that means that the legitimacy of the acting government in Kiev is open to debate, not a flat-fact, as the Times would have you believe. But in the world of Official Washington, anyone who details this more complicated history is engaging in "pro-Russian disinformation."

The other hypocrisy here is that it has been the U.S. government and the U.S. media that have actually practiced the dissemination of what appears to be disinformation, such as highlighting an anti-Semitic leaflet that was an apparent hoax falsely attributed to ethnic Russian protesters in eastern Ukraine to discredit them.

The Times also fell for a photographic hoax in which the Kiev regime and the State Department were palming off photos that purportedly proved that Russian troops, who had been photographed "clearly" in Russia, were later seen operating in eastern Ukraine (except that a key photo allegedly taken in Russia was actually snapped in Ukraine, destroying the story's premise).

Then, when the Times belatedly sent two reporters to eastern Ukraine to investigate the ethnic Russian rebels, the Times discovered what appeared to be an indigenous force operating without any instructions from Moscow. [See Consortiumnews.com's ["Another NYT 'Sort of' Retraction on Ukraine."](#)]

What Does Putin Want?

Still, the U.S. narrative blaming the crisis almost entirely on Putin has proven powerfully resistant to facts. And that makes Obama's job of laying out a truthful narrative, which could invite Putin's cooperation in resolving the crisis, that much harder.

From my reporting on Putin, I have concluded that Official Washington's analysis of him is seriously off-target. He is not particularly interested in taking over the economic basket case that is Ukraine. Crimea was a different story because of its strong historic ties to Russia, the presence of a Russian naval base at Sevastopol, and the overwhelming secession vote by the Crimean people. But even the expense of administering Crimea, including building a new bridge or tunnel from the Russian mainland, will tax the Kremlin's treasury.

What Putin wants more than anything, I'm told, is to have Russia accepted as a member of the First World and be afforded the accompanying respect and respectability. That was one reason why he invested so much in the Sochi Winter Olympics. He also appears to have had a fondness for President Obama and was eager to work with him in finding diplomatic answers to crises in Syria and

Iran.

But Putin is also a proud man who has been stung by his vilification over the Ukraine crisis which he feels was forced on him, not something he sought. The insults from Secretary of State John Kerry and other U.S. diplomats have been extremely offensive to him and he feels betrayed by Obama's unwillingness to rein in the excessive rhetoric of his subordinates.

Putin is on the verge of forsaking his First World aspirations, I'm told, as he has come to view the U.S. government and the EU as sources of endless double standards and double talk, places without honor. So, as part of any summit or cooperation with Obama over Ukraine, Putin first wants to hear an American "statement of intentions," i.e. a recognition of how valuable U.S.-Russian cooperation has been and can be.

But the prospect of Obama somehow finding the courage to rise to this occasion can't be considered high. He would have to do something like President John F. Kennedy did in his famous address at American University on June 10, 1963, when near the height of the Cold War Kennedy had the courage to assert the common humanity of Americans and Russians.

In perhaps his most important words, Kennedy said, "For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal."

Kennedy followed up his AU speech with practical efforts to work with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to rein in dangers from nuclear weapons and to discuss other ways of reducing international tensions, initiatives that Khrushchev welcomed although many of the hopeful prospects were cut short by Kennedy's assassination on Nov. 22, 1963. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Can Obama Speak Strongly for Peace?](#)"]

The question now regarding Ukraine and the possibility of a new Cold War is whether Obama can pick up Kennedy's torch of peaceful understanding and see the world through the eyes of the ethnic Russians in Donetsk as well as the pro-European youth in Kiev recognizing the legitimate concerns and the understandable fears of both.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives

for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).
