

The Clash of Civilizations in Ukraine

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A number of comments from the readers can also be found at that site.

Most accounts of the crisis in Ukraine focus on its hard-power aspects, such as Putin's objections to the 'advancement' of NATO, and his (presumed) desire to be remembered in history for having re-established the Russian empire, and then of course the day-to-day reports from the fighting. More mundane aspects are mentioned but are seen as secondary issues, for example the deep poverty in large parts of the Russian population. This fact may be mentioned since it explains how the Russian army can accept enormous losses in its 'meat grinder' tactics, and it may also explain how some Russian soldiers have looted private Ukrainian homes for refrigerators and washing-machines, but it is not part of the main story.

However, there is an alternative story that begins with the poverty issue, and that addresses important soft-power issues. In this story, the combination of the poverty by many and the excessive affluence of the kleptocrats add up to a serious danger for the current regime. This danger is not imminent, but it means that Russia may be susceptible to Western ideas of democracy, equality and human rights. The regime has to watch out so that the contagion of these ideas does not spread into Russia.

In this perspective, it is quite natural that the Russian government conducts its campaign against the LGBTQ movement and other progressive ideas. It is also natural that it has enlisted the reactionary orthodox church for its support. But most of all, it is natural that the regime promotes chauvinistic ideas using all the media at its disposal, and in particular for the schooling of the young.

In this perspective, the war in Ukraine is also a natural consequence of the perceived need to resist progressive ideas that are coming from the West. As long as Ukraine was similar to Russia as a post-soviet, stagnant and corrupt society it was not a threat, but as soon as Ukraine started to adopt Western ideas and wanted to become a part of Europe, the situation changed dramatically from the Russian

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point of view. A modern and prosperous Ukraine could easily be an inspiration for the Russian population, just like the strength of West Germany was an inspiration for the East German population, which led both to the construction of the Berlin wall and, some years later, to its removal.

This is an obvious reason for the full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022. It may not be the only reason, but it may well be one major reason, and maybe the strongest one. And — awful thought! — it may also be an explanation for the senseless destruction of Ukrainian housing, infrastructure, and farmland, since that destruction will serve to delay the return of prosperity to post-war Ukraine.

This clash of civilizations is not limited to Ukraine. It has happened in Belarus, and it sends bad vibes through major parts of Europe. We must pray that it ends well — and not only pray.