Russia and Its Neighbors: A Geopolitical Analysis of the Ukrainian Conflict

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Russia and Its Neighbors:
A Geopolitical GIS-Mapping of the Ukrainian Situation before the Current Conflict

Michele Pigliucci

Abstract

Within the context of a new Cold War between the Western powers and Russia, one of the most dangerous hot spots is Ukraine. Since 2014, in fact, the Ukrainian army has been engaged in a civil war against Russian-backed troops of self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk Republics. This crisis appears as a new geopolitical tool both for Russia and for the United States: for the former, in order to contain NATO expansion, for the latter, in order to counteract Russian influence and to open the way for U.S. liquefied natural gas exports in Europe, reducing European energy dependence on Russia (Chornii, 2015; Marples, 2016). The Ukrainian position is strategic: it is one of the main transit routes of Russian natural gas to European countries, with three main pipeline corridors. Knowledge of Ukraine's geographic situation is needed in order to better understand the evolving crisis in the region.

Introduction

This article maps various data with a GIS tool, in order to point out social and political factors underpinning the crisis. It highlights the deep differences between Western and Eastern regions of the country in the following aspects: economic differences, which will be described using macro-economic indicators in a regional-scaled map; demographic differences, which will be described through a regional-scaled map of population distribution by native language, in order to better highlight the role of Russia's influence in national identity; and political differences, which will be shown by mapping the 2010 presidential election results (the last vote before the crisis) in order to highlight the split among the Ukrainian people in the choice between European or Russian spheres of influence. By combining various data, we propose an "instability factor," namely an index composed of the elements with highest risk factor in the crisis. Through the "instability factor," a regional-scaled map will highlight the Ukrainian regions with the highest risk for an escalation of the Donbas crisis (Kulyk, 2016).

The Ukrainian Crisis (2014 to present)

For the past three years, the NATO-backed Ukrainian army has faced a civil war

against Russian-backed troops of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk (RPD) and People's Republic of Luhansk (RPL) (Nicolai, 2017). Overshadowed by a more spectacular Syrian civil war, the Ukrainian war is almost ignored by mainstream media, despite its importance and risk, especially for the European Union (Gaiani, 2014; Sceresini & Giroffi, 2015).

The current crisis erupted during the winter 2013-14, when violent clashes exploded in Kiev following Yanukovych's decision to halt the country's process of integration with the European Union. The growing clashes forced Yanukovych to leave the country (de Ploeg, 2017). Following his flight, a new government took power whose first act was the proposal to repeal the bilingualism law that recognized Russian as an official language of Ukraine (На Украине отменили закон… 2014; White, Feklyunia, 2014). In this way, the "Euromaidan" forces seemed to have the intention to exclude the Russian-speaking population, which was interpreted as a hostile act against the part of Ukrainian people who speak Russian as their first language (Dubin, 2017. cfr. Bocale, 2016).

During February 2014, armed people, pretending to be popular militia occupied regional government buildings in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and replaced the Ukrainian flag with the Russian one (Marxsen, 2014). On March 16, 2014, following a controversial ballot, the Russian Federation intruded and annexed Crimea. Russian-speaking rebels in the Eastern regions of Donec basin followed a similar path. In May 2014, Regional Administration buildings were occupied and self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) were established, following a referendum, while in Odessa, far-right Ukrainian protesters occupied the Trade Unions house, setting the building on fire and killing 46 pro-Russian people and injuring more than 200 (Hyde & Rudenko, 2014).

In May 2014, Yulia Tymoshenko and Petro Poroshenko faced off in a presidential election, the latter won collecting 54.7% votes, but Crimea and Donec basin population had not the chance to vote because of the crisis. One of the first acts of the newly elected President Poroshenko was to sign again an association agreement between Ukraine and the European Union, overriding the Yanukovych decision.

On the 5th of February 2015, People's Council members of the People's Republic of Donetsk issued a memorandum from which it is possible to find some elements that enable a better understanding of the aims of the self-proclaimed state. The document titled "Memorandum of Donetsk People's Republic on the principles of state-building, political and historical continuity" reads, in part, as follows:

> *We, members of the People's Council of Donetsk People's Republic of the first convocation, elected by universal democratic and free elections on November 2, 2014, taking into account the principles of international law, embodied in the Charter of the United Nations, proclaim the Memorandum on the principles of state-building, political and historical continuity. Based on the will of the people of Donbass, expressed in the referendum of May 11, 2014, in the Act of the proclamation of state*

independence of Donetsk People's Republic, the Declaration of Sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic from April 7, 2014, understanding of the need for the progressive development of law-making and state-building process, we affirm the historical connection of the state formations of the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Republic and Donetsk People's Republic (...).

We, members of the People's Council of Donetsk People's Republic, recognizing our responsibility to the past and paving the way to the future:

- declare the continuation of the traditions of Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Republic and declare that the state of Donetsk People's Republic is its successor;

- call for cooperation and uniting efforts to build a federal state on a voluntary contractual bases of all the territories and lands, that were part of Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Republic. (Donetsk Republic Memorandum…, 2015).

Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Republic (DKR) was a Republic founded in February 1918 by the IV Congress of Soviets of the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog basin, following the Russian Revolution (Донецко-Криворожская советская республика… 1969-1978). The Republic comprised of the territories of Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Kherson, Odessa, Nikolaev, Crimea, and Don Host *oblast (область)*. According to DPR and LPR memorandum, Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Republic never formally ceased to exist, despite the German occupation, war, and other social disasters, and "its ideas lived on in the hearts and souls of millions of people" (Donetsk Republic Memorandum…, 2015).

By solemnly affirming the historical continuity of DPR with the Soviet Republic of Donetsk-Krivoy Rog, a state created in February 1918 in order to integrate Donec e Krivoy Rog river basins, representatives of self-proclaimed Donbas Republics confirmed their wishes to extend control over the entire territory of the former Soviet Republic. A similar press release, published on 6th of April 2015 on a Russian website, claimed the reconstitution of Odessa Soviet Republic, a state proclaimed in 1918, then occupied by Germany until the end of the war. Such press releases had no concrete results but are useful to understand pro-Russian projects in the Ukrainian civil war.

This article aims at analyzing geographical elements of Ukraine's territory, in order to provide evidence related to the geopolitical situation of the country, studying critical elements and foreseeing potential consequences. The point is to highlight geographical elements useful to predict potential spread of conflict in other regions of the country.

Since "geography matters" (Massey & Allen, 1984), knowledge of territory is needed for every geopolitical analysis, in order to counteract the so-called "geographic banalization," namely the loss of geographical knowledge due to popularly available information tools (Borruso, 2010, p. 243). Without geographical knowledge, it is impossible to understand geopolitical issues (Battisti, 2002). Geopolitics is the "dynamic stage" of political geography (Massi, 1931), and

requires deep analysis of mapping (Boria, 2007; Boria, 2008) varied complex factors within and across territories, in order to understand the relationships among economic, social, and political data.

Ukraine and the Energy Market

Ukraine is a key territory both for the European Union and for Russia. Due to its geographical position, Ukraine is a transition area for natural gas supply coming from Russia towards Europe (Semenenko, 2015). European import of hydrocarbons from Russia represents 39.3% of the total for natural gas, 33.5% for oil, as well as 6% of total European energy consumption (Eurostat, *data*, 2013). The European Union is the main export market for Russian natural gas, with an export of 161.5 billion cubic meters (bcm) (Gazprom, *export data*, 2013). The whole hydrocarbons market is 15% of the Russian Federation's GDP (World Bank Group, *data*, 2013).

Figure 1. Ukraine Territory, with main cities and Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) Zone. Source: created by author.

The European Union, mainly pushed by former Warsaw Pact states, has, for many years, tried to reduce energy dependence from Russia and to break free from the supply control that serves as a Russian pressure tool on European national governments.[1] The strategy of Gazprom, a Russian state-controlled company for natural gas mining and distribution, is the use of prices as a control tool on former

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[1] Mainly Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania.

Warsaw Pact states. This strategy became evident during the crisis between Russia and Ukraine, in the winter 2008-09, when Gazprom used natural gas supply (as well as threats to block it) to stop the leaning of Ukraine towards the European Union and NATO (Kandiyoti, 2015).

During the winter 2013-14, when the current crisis started, price policy was openly used to sustain or to counteract policies of the Ukrainian government. In November 2013, after Yanukovych stopped the process of association and free trade with the European Union, Gazprom implemented a radical cut of hydrocarbons prices to Ukraine. In the same way, in February 2014, after Yanukovych escaped from the country, Gazprom punished the "Euromaidan" *coup d'état* by raising prices by 81%.[2]

A dense pipeline network (Figure 2) shows how all the natural gas and oil exported from Russia to Europe passes through two hubs: Ukraine and the Baltic Sea. The Nord Stream Pipeline runs through the Baltic bypassing Poland to reach Germany. The Belarus branch of pipeline passes through Ukrainian territory before reaching Europe, thus dependent on the relationship between Kiev and Moscow. Market access for the main Russian state-company depends on stability and capacity of these two hubs.

Instability in Ukraine has pushed Russia to try to open new paths for pipelines with three main projects. These are: (a) Nord Stream 2 project against which former Warsaw Pact countries are protesting and that would expand pipeline capacity from 33 bcm to 55 bcm; (b) South Stream projected pipeline that would bypass Ukraine from the south passing through the Black Sea with a 63 bcm flow (hindered by European Union); and (c) Turkish Stream pipeline that would pass through Turkey and whose completion closely depends on many factors such as the Syrian crisis, instability of Turkish regime, and difficult relations between Ankara and the European Union (Paolini, 2014). The issue of building a new pipeline bypassing Ukraine involves many European countries, like the former Warsaw Pact states, which are trying to halt new pipeline projects from Russia in order to avoid Moscow cutting off the Kiev gas market. Western countries are also trying to take advantage of every opportunity to improve their national energy security.

A real arm wrestling match took place in the European Union among Italy (pushing for the building of South Stream, in which Italian State-company ENI is involved), Germany (aiming to reach the goal of doubling Nord Stream Pipeline), and Greece (interested in the Turkish Stream project). In the middle, former Warsaw Pact European countries, led by Poland, pushed the European Union to enforce anti-trust rules against every new Gazprom project (De Maio, 2016a). In February 2015, the European Commission approved an Energy Union Strategy, following pressure from some Eastern-European countries, a project aimed at finding a long-term strategy to "free" European Union from Russian dependence. Until now, the result of this competition was the halting of the South Stream project,

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[2] The issue of Ukraine purchase of Russian gas has its roots in 1991. Being in Russian sphere of influence, Ukraine have paid below-market prices until the 2014 crisis. Still today, buying Russian gas for Ukraine is quite a bit cheaper than many other energy sources. During 2009 gas crisis, Gazprom accused Ukraine government of stealing gas from transit supplies.

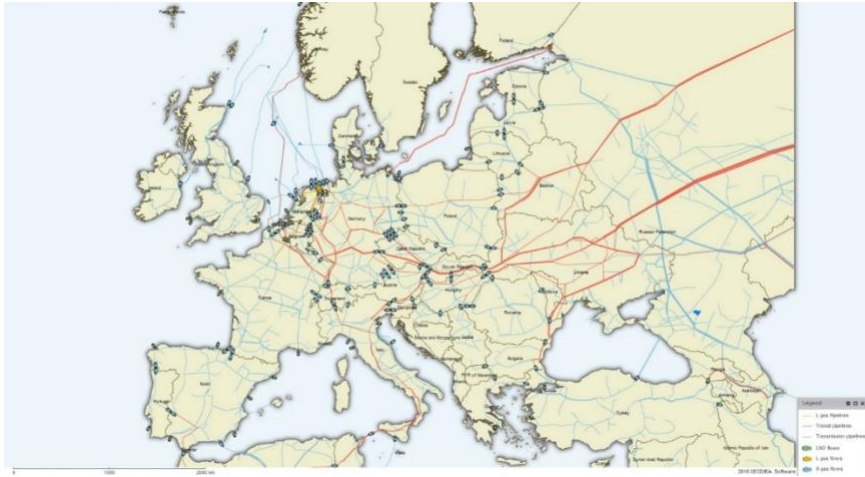while North Stream 2 and Turkish Stream still remain on the table.

Figure 2. European pipeline network. Source: International Energy Agency, 2014.

In some sense, persistent opposition coming from the European Union to any new pipeline project–and in particular from former Warsaw Pact states, wishful to preserve the strategic centrality of Kiev–prevents any reduction of energy traffic concentration in the Belarus-Ukrainian region. Since any loosening of European dependence from Russian gas looks a long way off, Ukraine remains the main traffic hub, as well as a geopolitical tension hub. The United States and Eastern European countries are trying to pull Ukraine to the European side where the entry of Ukraine into the European Union would extend the European rules on energy and open the road to liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports from the United States, hence loosening the ties through which Europe remains linked to Russia. When visiting European countries in March 2014, President Obama aimed to propose the United States as an alternative supplier for European energy needs, in order to "free" Europe from dependence on Russia (European leaders ask…, 2014). This is the only concrete project aimed to weaken European energy dependence on Russia, but it is still far from realization (cfr. Youngs, 2009).

On the other side, Russia is trying to keep Kiev in its sphere of influence in order to maintain control of a large part of gas and oil trade with Europe, especially since Europe is trying to halt the pipeline projects coming from Russia that bypass Ukraine. In the meantime, the Ukrainian war is seriously affecting the gas trade, harming Ukraine's economy, stressed by a fast-growing public debt. According to President Poroshenko's speech in the U.N. assembly (September 2015), the total amount of war costs for Ukraine is close to $5 million per day. Not just Kiev but also Moscow is affected by these significant losses. Gazprom energy exports are often halted due to sanctions imposed by the United States and allies following Crimea's occupation. However, Ukraine's civil war is not just related to energy.

There are other geographic, political, economic, and linguistic reasons that need to be understood and taken into account. Territory is never a neutral factor in such a geopolitical crisis and it is impossible to understand the Ukrainian situation without knowing more about its territorial background. For this reason, we need to focus the analysis at the regional scale, in order to give place-based evidence to a complex situation.

The Ukrainian Situation before the 2014 Crisis

Ukrainian war mainly concentrate within the territory of the Donec basin, straddling Donetsk and Luhansk *oblast*, a territory now partly controlled by the self-proclaimed RPD and RPL. The Ukrainian government does not recognize neither the republics nor the *de facto* annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation. Kiev calls these territories Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) zone. The zone encompasses around 7.5% of national territory (Crimea included), i.e., around 45,000 km^2 on an over 600,000 km^2 national area (Figure 1).

Ukrainian territory is composed of 24 *oblast* – an administrative regional level corresponding to NUTS 2 level[3] – two cities with special status (Kiev and Sevastopol) and the autonomous Republic of Crimea.[4] By analyzing census 2001 data, the last available before the crisis, it is possible to observe that the economic reality of various *oblast* is deeply unequal.[5] There are many differences amongst regions. The first indicator chosen in this research is the regional GDP per capita. By mapping this, it is possible to see that regional GDP per capita of Eastern *oblast* is up to three time larger than Western ones, with 13,228 hryvnias produced in Chernivtsi against 42,068 hryvnias in Dnipropetrovsk (Figure 3).[6] Eastern *oblast* have an industrial infrastructure specialized in iron metallurgy and coal mining.

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[3] The nomenclature of territorial units for statistics, abbreviated NUTS (from the French version Nomenclature des Unités territoriales statistiques) is a geographical nomenclature that subdivide the territory of European Union at three different levels (NUTS 1, 2, and 3, from larger to smaller).

[4] For a better readability, in the maps realized for this paper, the Kiev data were merged to the Kiev *oblast* data, while Sevastopol data were merged to Autonomous Republic of Crimea data.

[5] Except where differently specified, all the data of this analysis are referred to 2001 census. http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/. The aim is to highlight situation of the country before crisis.

[6] U.S. dollar to Ukrainian hryvnia rate is 1=26.9400 (March 2017). 13.228 hryvnias is equivalent to around $491, while 42.068 hryvnias is equivalent to around 1.561€. State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2011.
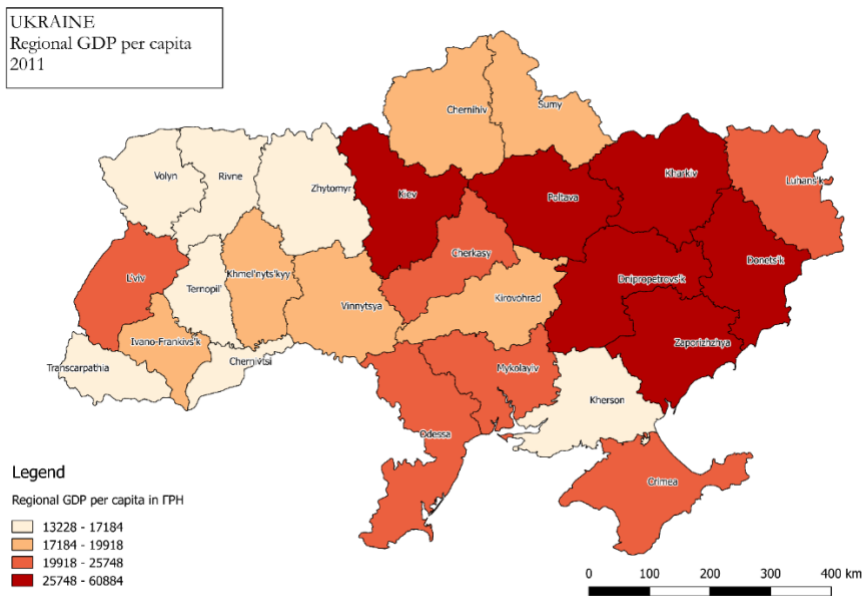
Figure 3. Regional GDP per capita in hryvnias, 2011. Source: Created by author based on State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2011.

Economic differences among regions are really deep, and they are reflected on average wages: people living in Eastern countries earn on average $100-120 more than Western countries. The gap between Donetsk *oblast* and Ternopol *oblast* reach $164 average, showing a situation of dependence of poor regions on richest ones, whose economy is based mainly on mines and natural resources.

There are also many other differences in population distribution in the *oblast*. According to census questions related to mother tongue, a very significant share of the population uses Russian language, and not Ukrainian in the home. It is helpful to plot this data in a regional map (Figure 5) in order to better understand the distribution of this population. The Russian-speaking people are mainly located in Eastern *oblast* and in a coastal strip from Black Sea to Odessa (where it exceeds 40% of total population), while the Ukrainian-speaking population is mainly distributed in the Western and central regions. In addition, urban population distribution is unequal, with a distribution similar to that of mother tongue: of nine total cities with more than 500,000 people, seven are in the Eastern side, while in Western *oblast* there are just Kiev and L'viv. Therefore, by looking at the maps, we can evaluate deep differences–economic, social, demographic–between the Eastern and Western Ukrainian regions. The Eastern *oblast* are on average much richer, more urbanized, and with higher percentage of Russian-speaking population than the Western ones (Corsale, 2016).

Figure 4. Salaries per region in USD, 2013. Source: (И все развалилось… 2014)

Another major difference is related to political beliefs and ideology. The last Ukrainian presidential elections before the crisis were held in two rounds in 2010: the first round on 17th January, and the second round on 7th February. Eighteen candidates competed, but the biggest competition was between Russian-backed Viktor Yanukovych and UE-backed Yulia Tymošenko, the representative of Orange Revolution movement, which led to the government of Viktor Juščenko in 2005.
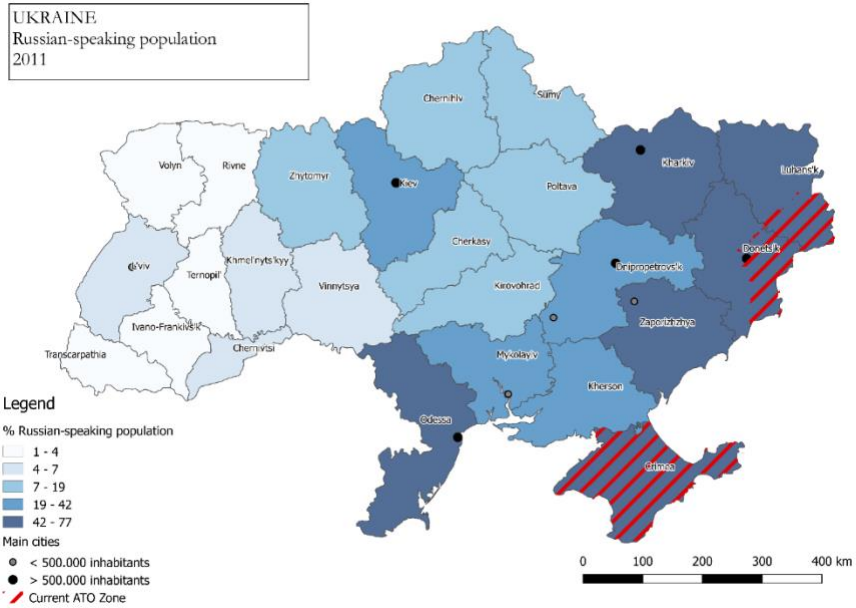
Figure 5. Russian-speaking people in percentage, 2001. Source: Created by author based on Census data, 2001.
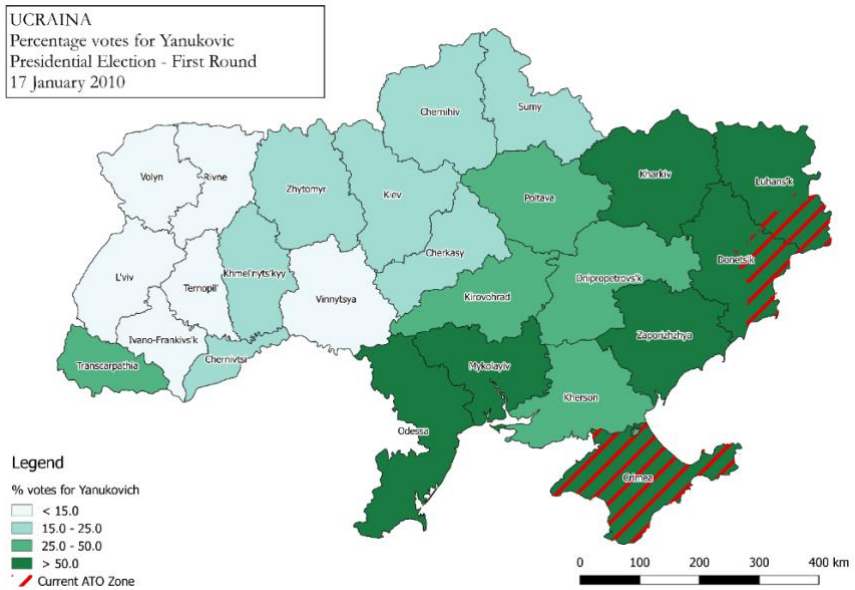

Figure 6. Percentage votes for Yanukovych, first round presidential election, 17th January 2010. Source: Created by author based on election results, 2010.

By analyzing the results of this election before the crisis, it is possible to better understand the political differences within the Ukrainian population. In fact, this data shows the power of two influential spheres, a Russian one and European one, on a population deeply divided. During the last few years, debating policies of European Union integration represented one of the main reasons for political discord between supporters of a Ukraine closer to Europe, and defenders of the traditional position of the country, as a Russia strategic ally since the falling of the Berlin wall. Through territorialization of electoral data from these first and second rounds, it is possible to determine the distribution of supporters of the two factions, and then compare the results with socioeconomic and demographic elements.

The economic and linguistic data we observed between Western and Eastern *oblast* is mostly reflected in electoral results. Russian-backed Yanukovych became president thanks to votes collected in the Eastern Russian-speaking *oblast*. Despite the high number of candidates in some Eastern *oblast,* Yanukovych collected more than 50% of votes already in the first round, exceeding 70% in Donetsk and Luhansk, and 60% in Crimea (Figure 6). The same pattern for Yulia Tymošenko, whose votes were collected for the most part in Western and Northern *oblast*, exceeding 50% in Volyn *oblast* (Figure 7).
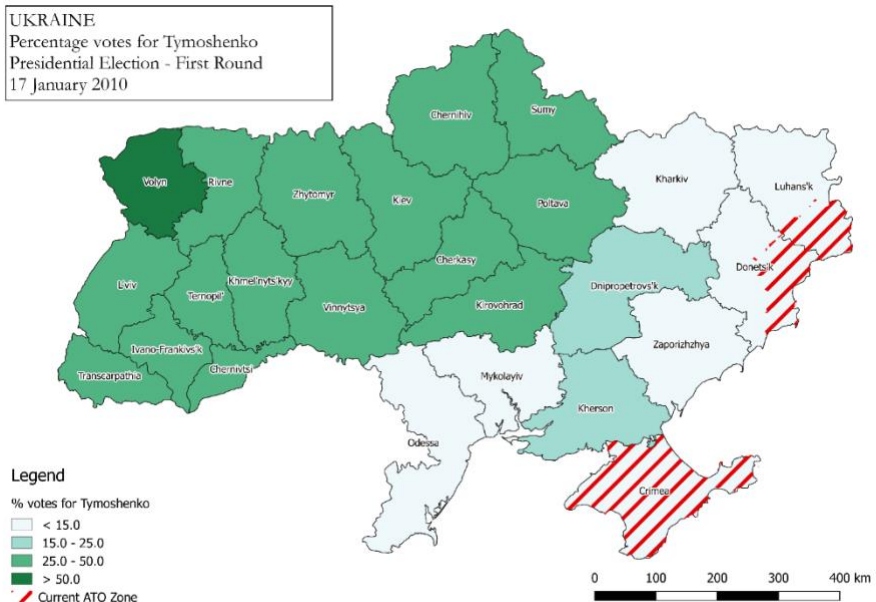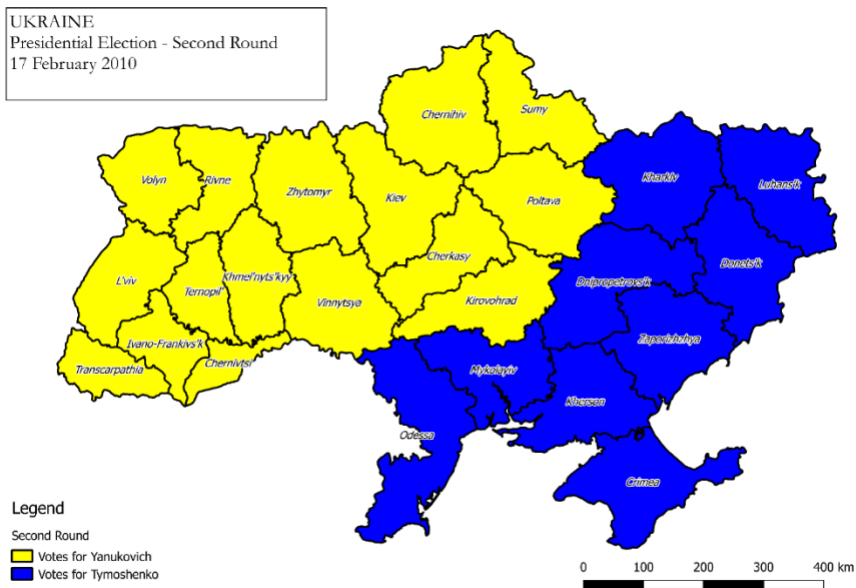

Figure 7. Percentage votes for Tymošenko, first round presidential election, 17th January 2010. Source: Created by author based on election results, 2010.
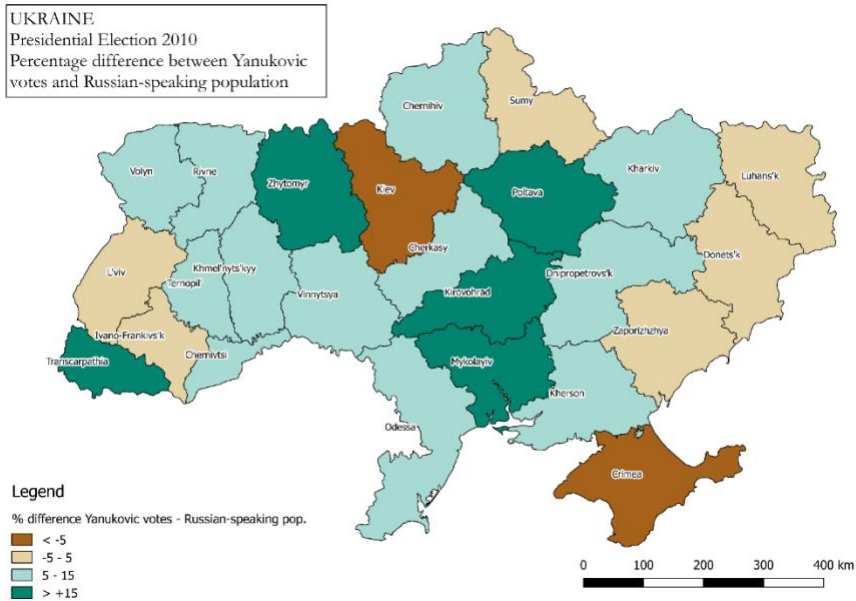
During the second round, this difference became more evident: Yanukovych, the pro-Russian candidate (winning with a difference slightly lower than 900,000 votes), dominated in all the Eastern regions, while his rival exceeded half of all votes in all Western regions (Figure 8). It is possible to read the vote for Yanukovych as a vote for a Russian sphere of influence: following the 2004 Orange Revolution, the issue of pursuing pro-European or pro-Russian policies strongly influenced the 2010 election campaign, representing the real dividing line amongst candidates.

Figure 8. Distribution of votes for second round candidates, presidential elections, February 7, 2010. Source: Created by author based on election results, 2010.

Votes for Yanukovych mainly came from Russian-speaking population, while competitor votes came from the Ukrainian-speaking population. In this case, on a quick analysis, the results would appear to be based on ethnicity, or on a linguistic-based preference reflected in political results. Nevertheless, by comparing the presidential election results with the Russian-speaking population data, it is possible to discover a different situation: only in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhya regions did votes for Yanukovych almost perfectly overlap with Russian-speaking data, while within the other *oblast* this is not the case. In Crimea, the future president collected a percentage of votes 15% lower than the Russian-speaking population percentage; within Kiev region, this difference was 10%, while in other *oblast* Yanukovych votes far outnumbered the Russian-speaking population (+22% in Mykolayiv, +25% in Kirovohrad, even +27% in Western Transcarpathia, on the

border with Moldavia). Yanukovych was elected because of this perhaps unexpected support. This is a sign of the penetration power of Russian influence in Ukrainian-speaking population, and of the general complexity of this political situation (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Percentage difference between Yanukovych votes and Russian-speaking population. Source: Created by author based on Ukraine Census data (2001) and election results, 2010.

The Instability Factor

Through cartographic place evidence, it is possible to highlight some aspects of Ukrainian regional situation before the "Euromaidan" crisis. Maps show a complex situation, with deep social, economic, and linguistic differences. The portrayal of Ukraine as a country with a Europhile population forced under the energetic geopolitical pressure of Russia does not fully describe the greater geographical complexity of the region. Through a set of data indicators, it is possible to highlight some factors of greater influence on this crisis, and useful to understand possible future scenarios.

Starting from analyzed territorial data, it is possible to generate a synthetic index called the "instability factor," which aims to summarize the major indicators that lead and sustain the current political crisis: linguistic composition of population; Russian-speaking population distribution; Russian political influence (counted by percentage of Yanukovych votes in the presidential elections); and economic disparity, counted by regional GDP per capita, which often accompanies

political tensions.

The formula for this index is the mathematical sum of the selected indicators, expressed in percentage: the Russian-speaking population according to 2001 census; the result of Yanukovych votes in the last presidential election before the crisis (2010); and the regional share of GDP per capita (2011). The author decided not to weight differently these indicators in this analysis considering them a simple vector of loss of stability in the field of this geopolitical context. Please find the composite scores listed alphabetically below by *oblast* from a scale of (64) to (281).

Table 1: *Instability Factor by* Oblast *in the Region*

Oblast name	Instability Factor
Autonomous Republic of Crimea	208
Cherkasy *Oblast*	98
Chernihiv *Oblast*	98
Chernivtsi *Oblast*	71
Dnipropetrovs'k *Oblast*	221
Donetsk *Oblast*	279
Ivano-Frankivs'k *Oblast*	75
Kharkiv *Oblast*	193
Kherson *Oblast*	281
Khmel'nyts'kyy *Oblast*	80
Kiev *Oblast*	255
Kirovohrad *Oblast*	107
Luhansk *Oblast*	228
L'viv *Oblast*	81
Mykolayiv *Oblast*	163
Odessa *Oblast*	183
Poltava *Oblast*	158
Rivne *Oblast*	74
Sumy *Oblast*	104
Ternopil' *Oblast*	64
Transcarpathia *Oblast*	83
Vinnytsya *Oblast*	82
Volyn *Oblast*	72
Zaporizhzhya *Oblast*	196
Zhytomyr *Oblast*	91

Source: Created by author based on Ukraine Census data (2001), State Statistics Service of Ukraine ,2001 and election results, 2010.

The data are collected from the Election results, 2001 State Census, and State Statistics Service of Ukraine, before the deep changes brought by the current crisis, and aims to give evidence to territorial elements on a regional basis. Through this tool it is possible to understand which territories presented significant critical elements before the war and consequently which territories are permeable to an

eventual spread of conflict. The higher factor means a greater risk for the region to be affected by an eventual spread of the crisis due to the presence of these main elements at the outset of the current war.
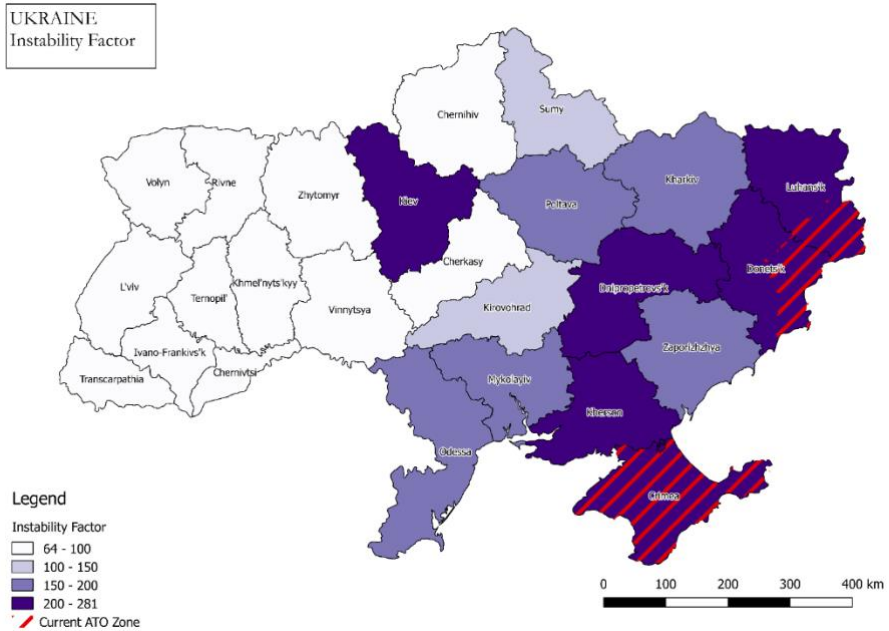

Figure 10. Instability factor. Source: Created by author based on Ukraine Census data (2001), State Statistics Service of Ukraine 2011 and election results, 2010.

A regional map of this factor allows us to understand how deep are the differences in Ukrainian regions; furthermore, through the instability factor, it is possible to foresee the potential spread of the current crisis particularly to Dnipropetrovsk and Kherson *oblast* where the index exceeds 200, reaching the same level as Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea regions (Figure 10).

Conclusion

The instability factor is useful to understand the major factors on which the Ukrainian crisis and civil war are based, and their diffusion in the region. The goal of this research is to identify trends that help to understand, examine, and foresee the eventual evolution of crisis. This index highlights how risk zone interests encompass all Eastern regions and the whole coastal strip of the Black Sea from Mariupol to Odessa region.

This analysis shows that in case of the spread of civil war, these *oblast* would be more permeable to secessionist pro-Russian agenda with the aim to connect Russia to the Odessa region. Such an eventual *de facto* annexation of the coastal strip–similar to what happened in Donbas–would cut off Kiev from the Black Sea,

letting rebels to link with Republic of Moldova. In Moldova, a strong pro-Russian movement is pushing the country to strengthen ties with Moscow. In the end of 2016, Igor Dodon, a pro-Russian leader, won the presidential elections in Moldova. His first act as a new president was to remove the European flag from the presidential building. In this context, the target of a self-proclaimed Republic to be recognized as a renewed historical Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Republic, as written in the statement published in 2015, indicate a new purpose: to promote the ties between Russia and Europe, cutting off Ukraine from its current position as an energy hub. In the case of a coastal alliance between Russia and Moldova, Gazprom's new pipeline would easily reach Europe bypassing Ukraine and diminishing its central role in the European energy supply. However, access to the pipeline is crucial for maintaining the entire Ukrainian economic system, its loss having catastrophic consequences for Ukraine (Fasola, 2016).

The geopolitical situation of Ukraine is quite different from the previous Cold War confrontations (cfr. Wilson, 2016). In this case, the likely direct involvement of Russian soldiers in fighting, as well as the not-so-secret involvement of U.S. intelligence forces in backing Ukrainian Army against DPR and LPR forces, appear as evidence for increased possibility of direct conflict [7]. The energy issue is an economic tool used to strengthen or weaken the ties between former Soviet Republics–like Ukraine–and Europe or Russia. The main issue for the United States is a kind of a new "Reagan Doctrine": according to this, the United States is directly involved in regime change actions in the key-countries for Russian economy, such as Ukraine (Szporluk, 2000). Destabilization of pro-Russian regimes and support to anti-Russian movements are crucial actions that are part of strategy in counteracting Russia's attempts to expand influence (cfr. Khrushcheva, Maltby, 2015). [8]

Similarly, the main issue for Russia is to keep Ukraine out from Euro-U.S. influence, in order to avoid NATO to reach its borders. For Moscow, selling natural gas is the best way to keep countries tied to Russian influence, taking advantage of their growing energy needs. In this sense, Ukraine's key position in the pipeline network is the main reason for Russia to keep control on Kiev. The Russian economy depends on energy sales to Europe, and Moscow can't risk being cut off from Europe by an anti-Russian regime, at least until new pipelines are built.

It is really hard to foresee how this conflict will be solved. Since 2014, Russian-backed forces are fighting against regular and irregular Ukrainian troops, in an exhausting and bloody war. [9] Through the analysis of this article, what is possible to

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[7] Proof of the direct involvement of Russian soldiers are in the events of capture of some of them by Ukrainian authorities on battleground. (Captured Russian troops… 2014; cfr. Harris, Dreazen, 2014)

[8] The direct involvement of the U.S. government in Ukraine crisis is proved by several sources. The idea of a new "Reagan Doctrine" is a reading of author, based on these sources. (Интересы РФ и США…2014: interview of George Friedman, CEO of Stratfor, calling the overthrow of Yanukovych the "most blatant coup in history"); (Kaylan, 2014; Ukraine crisis… 2014: transcription of leaked Nuland-Pyatt call); Milne S., 2014.

[9] According to VoaNews, United Nations estimates around 10,000 people have been killed and around 23,500 injured since 2014 to July 2017. (OHCHR: Deaths… 2017).

forecast is the possibility of a macro regional spread of the violence, and the potential involvement of certain regions in the operation, due to high levels of the instability factor. However, the instability factor could also be used to develop targeted policies in order to prevent this spread by intervening on economic, social, and cultural elements. For example, establishing policies that provide greater autonomy to Russian-speaking regions and develop proper laws for the protection and adequate representation of minorities, while also introducing measures to reduce economic disparities including autonomous energy policies for Ukraine with regards to both the European Union and Russia, could effectively mitigate against the spread of the crisis. In conclusion, geography matters, in Ukraine such as everywhere: the deeper the knowledge of the real situation of a country, through territorialized regional-scaled data, the deeper will be the understanding of real differences in territories and related problems, and the stronger will be the preventive action of national and international policy and decision makers.

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