



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

Author: Sasha Maksymenko; URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-government_protests_in_Kiev_\(13087644205\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-government_protests_in_Kiev_(13087644205).jpg)

Poland - The Ukrainian Crisis in the Polish Media

Łukasz Sommer and Joanna Wawrzyniak

Cultures of History Forum, published: 02.06.2014

DOI: 10.25626/0024

The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This article focuses on Poland.

Recommended Citation

Łukasz Sommer and Joanna Wawrzyniak: Poland - The Ukrainian Crisis in the Polish Media. In: Cultures of History Forum (02.06.2014), DOI: 10.25626/0024

Copyright (c) 2014 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the copyright holders. For permission please contact the editors.

Poland - The Ukrainian Crisis in the Polish Media

The Ukrainian crisis has received massive media coverage in Poland. Politicians and journalists eagerly abandoned cultural wars to report on the threat of a real one. For a while, disputes over gender mainstreaming, which had hit the headlines last year, were suspended and many seemed relieved to finally have a grand topic to comment on.

As the ex-dissident journalist Marcin Meller put it, "All right, the party is over. We've entertained ourselves with our recycling bins, gotten soft over gluten, cried over the ozone hole, paraded with feathers stuck in our asses, it was all fun, and now Vova Putin is reminding us what real life is about. [...] It turns out we are not living in post-history, after all: history is happening as it has been for thousands of years. [...] Reality is knocking on our doors, we're just still pretending it has mistaken us for our neighbor."^[1] Covering the period from the Maidan (November 2013-February 2014) to the Crimean crisis (February-April 2014), we give a brief insight into Polish public memory, commenting on the country's main political cleavage and then on the historical perspectives employed by the media. To be sure, the Polish reactions to the Ukraine crisis have been more than a historical commentary on domestic politics;^[2] politicians and intellectuals have been discussing possible outcomes of the conflict, and civil society agents have been engaged in helping the Ukrainians. Nonetheless, it is history that makes the Ukrainian conflict communicable in the Polish public sphere.

Political horizons

Only a year after the EU elections in May 2014, the Polish party system will face another serious challenge with the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015. According to a major polling institute, popular interest in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict has been almost universal (88%) and independent of the social-demographic background of those questioned. [The majority of Poles are convinced that the Polish government should play a role in resolving the conflict](#), but most of them (67%) believe it should only act within the framework of international institutions. This may actually be good news for Donald Tusk's pro-European conservative-liberal Civic Platform, which has been in power since 2007 and is now at risk of losing to the populist Law and Justice Party.

During the Maidan protests, the notion of Central and Eastern Europe as a cultural and political entity was revived with the broader aim of depicting the Polish government as an advocate of the Ukrainian cause in Europe.^[3] In particular, the EU Eastern Partnership Project targeted at Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine was refreshed. More recently, the center media - in particular *Gazeta Wyborcza* - praised Prime Minister Donald Tusk and his Minister for Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski for their attempts to mobilize the EU towards a unified reaction to Putin's Russia. [Sikorski has been particularly active on Twitter](#), advocating among other things an energy union to undermine the Russian gas monopoly. However, the liberal media tended to focus on security questions. Publicists called for stronger (albeit unspecified) sanctions and were disappointed to find European states unwilling to go beyond verbal support for Ukraine. Germany's economic entanglements with Russia were commented on with particular bitterness. Much concern has also been expressed regarding the Ukrainians' ability to put their state on strong footing and introduce the economic reforms necessary for the resumption of growth.

In the meantime, some of the right-wing media (e.g. the portals *Niezalezna.pl* and *wPolityce.pl*) that sympathize with Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice party have stressed the relevance of the late President Lech Kaczyński's political legacy, quoting the statement he made in Tbilisi in 2008: "Today it is Georgia, tomorrow it may be Ukraine, then the Baltic States, and then even my own country, Poland!"^[4] In this narrative, Kaczyński is presented as an uncompromising, far-sighted statesman whose absence is particularly poignant in the present crisis - or, in an extreme version, who would have prevented it from happening.^[5] Some authors have resurrected the idea that President Kaczyński's death in the Smolensk plane crash of 2010 was in fact an assassination by the Russians: according to them, his lack of illusions about Russia and his repeated appeals for solidarity in post-Communist Eastern Europe were a threat to Moscow's strategies, making the Kremlin keen to get rid of him.^[6] In the context of these and related themes, the present government is criticized for its alleged appeasement policy towards Russia before the Ukrainian crisis.

Historical memories recycled

As the situation on the Maidan grew tense, Polish reports and analyses of the Ukrainian drama employed various historical narratives as points of reference to invoke familiar associations. Remarkably, the troubled history of Polish-Ukrainian relations in the twentieth century (the two independence movements' struggle for Lwów/Lviv, the repression of Ukrainians in interwar Poland, the massacres of 1943/1944, the forced resettlement of Poland's Ukrainians following Second World War) are only some of a plethora of themes. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea, probably the most prominent one has been the geopolitical story of East Central European nation states in Second World War and the Cold War, which were ripped to shreds by totalitarian powers. The Anschluss of Austria, German aggression towards Czechoslovakia, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Gleiwitz incident, the *drôle guerre*, and the West's abandonment of the East in Yalta have frequently been recalled, with Vladimir Putin featuring as a reincarnation of Stalin or Hitler. A passage from his speech after the Crimean referendum - "We want Ukraine to be a strong, sovereign and self-reliant state"^[7] - was exposed to be a calque of Stalin's statement on Poland in 1945.

Such associations strengthen the impression that 'the evil empire' is back. Soviet military interventions in East Central Europe have been recalled, particularly those of 1953 (GDR), 1956 (Hungary), and 1968 (Czechoslovakia). With reference to the latter, another fragment from Putin's Crimea speech ("we couldn't have left [the Crimeans] in need") was compared to a statement by Leonid Brezhnev justifying sending in troops to Czechoslovakia. The familiar Polish phrase *wejdą - nie wejdą?* ('will they invade or will they not?'), a popular expression of the political anxieties of 1981, has also been recycled, and Adam Michnik predicted that intervening in Ukraine would have a similar effect on Russia that the invasion of Afghanistan had on the Soviet Union.

The recurring question of whether the Cold War has returned is not always asked in fear. In fact, it often expresses a longing for clear-cut geopolitical divisions and for the firm hand of the United States. References have been made to Zbigniew Brzezinski's book *The Grand Chessboard* (1997) with its concept of East Central Europe as the gate to American primacy in Eurasia. In the right-wing media, Cold War associations reflect nostalgia for powerful individual players on the global scene - Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher or John Paul II.^[7] There, the Ukrainian crisis resonates with traditional charges of cowardice and cynicism - or at best weakness and naivety - levelled against the EU. There is broad agreement that an increased presence of NATO troops in Poland is desirable. Interestingly, references to World War II have also been made in that regard: while supporting the idea, Jarosław Kaczyński of the Law and Justice party specified that no German soldiers should be stationed on Polish soil.

A complementary narrative used to dress up the Ukrainian events, especially the Maidan, in a Polish historical costume is the story of civil society. Unlike in Western Europe, there have been few analogies to such phenomena as Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados or the Arab Spring. The dominant point of reference has been the Solidarity movement, due to the alleged parallels in experiences and historical contexts - the struggle for independence against Russian pressure; solidarity and civil disobedience that eventually precipitates the fall of a dictatorship. This set of associations is reflected, for example, in the open letter by Poland's artistic circles to the Prime Minister,^[9] appealing for financial and political support for Ukraine: "We have moral and political obligations towards Ukraine which, just like our country in the past, is embarking on the path of reform, while its economy is in a dramatic predicament. Let us help Ukraine. Remember we have been helped by others, too." The 1989 Round Table Talks have also been recalled^[10] - mostly as a peaceful dismantlement of an authoritarian regime, a positive experience that Poland could share with Ukraine, but also in a critical way, as an unfinished revolution that prevented proper reform and guaranteed impunity to the villains of the fallen regime.

Finally, there is the perspective focusing on the Ukrainian far right, whose nationalist message and historical heritage have been a cause for great concern in Poland. There has been a visible tendency on both ends of the political spectrum to present radical nationalists as a leading force on the Maidan. Again, historical associations have been exploited. One of the recurring themes has been the Volhynia (1943/1944) mass killings of Poles by the nationalist guerilla army UPA on the instructions of the radical organization OUN. Because of their anti-Soviet struggle and postwar persecution, part of the Ukrainian public acknowledges these groups as a legitimate element of the national resistance tradition. A clash of official historical narratives was inevitable, and indeed, the presence of nationalist symbols and portraits of the OUN leader Stepan Bandera in the Maidan scandalized many Poles. The wartime term *banderovcy*, which originally referred to the UPA militants, was revived and sometimes extended to the entire Maidan movement. In this respect, Polish anti-Maidan rhetoric has closely followed the official Russian model. The view of the Maidan as a CIA-backed alliance of fascists and capitalists has united some commentators (as well as entire periodicals and websites) from the nationalist right and from the communism-nostalgic left - both of which have been inclined to sympathize with Putin's Russia on other issues too.^[11]

Obviously enough, this meeting of political extremes is accompanied by bitter splits within the traditionally defined "right" and "left" - those sympathizing with the Maidan (and with the post-Maidan Ukrainian state in its struggle against Russian pressure) have found themselves closer than usual to the mainstream media.^[12] In this way, one might argue that the Ukrainian crisis has - locally and temporarily at least - led to a shift in some political and ideological alliances in Poland's public sphere. Again, historical references proved effective in highlighting Poland's current internal tensions. The intensive, emotion-ridden and history-saturated nature of the Polish media coverage of the Ukrainian crisis may thus be read as a reflection of various things: Polish-Ukrainian closeness, the enduring power of historical associations in Poland's public discourse, and the country's tendency to remain, after all, self-centered.

Footnotes

1. Marcin Meller, Gender śmender wojna, Newsweek-Polska (19 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.wykop.pl/ramka/1913408/marcin-meller-gender-smender-wojna>.
2. Jak pomóc Ukrainie? Akcje solidarności w całej Polsce, Polskie Radio (20 February 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.polskieradio.pl/5/3/Artykul/1056528.Jak-pomoc-Ukrainie-Akcje-solidarnosci-w-calej-Polsce>.
3. In this respect, Poland's 'Ukraine discourse' has been profoundly affected by the late Jerzy Giedroyc, postwar émigré and editor of the influential Paris-based journal *Kultura*. Giedroyc was known as a consistent and outspoken advocate of a Polish-Ukrainian rapprochement, seeing a sovereign Ukraine as a guarantee of Poland's independence - an idea that one might see as an extension and adaptation of the prewar concepts of Marshall Józef Piłsudski. If direct references to the "Giedroyc doctrine" were not very frequent during the recent crisis, it is arguably because it has been so deeply engraved into the mainstream tradition of Polish political thought. As early as October 2013, the Undersecretary of State Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz reminded us that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs policy in the East is based on Giedroyc's legacy. On this, see, for example, Tomasz Kamiński, *Wizjonerzy zostawili nam za duże buty. O niezrozumieniu koncepcji polityki wschodniej Jerzego Giedroycia, Liberté!* (20 January 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://liberte.pl/wizjonerzy-zostawili-nam-za-duze-buty-o-niezrozumieniu-koncepcji-polityki-wschodniej-jerzego-giedroycia>; or Magdalena Grochowska, *Giedroyc godzi Lacha z rezunem*, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (7 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1.136821.15587384.Giedroyc_godzi_Lacha_z_rezunem.html.
4. Tomasz Sakiewicz, *Teraz Lech Kaczyński wygrał*, *Niezależna.pl* (29 January 2014) retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://niezalezna.pl/51247-teraz-lech-kaczynski-wygral>; Dawid Wildstein, *Smutne zwycięstwo Lecha Kaczyńskiego*, *Niezależna.pl* (5 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://niezalezna.pl/52540-smutne-zwyciestwo-lecha-kaczynskiego>; "Wiemy świetnie, że dziś Gruzja, jutro Ukraina, a później może i czas na mój kraj, na Polskę!" Lech Kaczyński w sierpniu 2008 r. w Tbilisi, wPolityce (19 February 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/186022-wiemy-swietnie-ze-dzis-gruzja-jutro-ukraina-a-pozniej-moze-i-czas-na-moj-kraj-na-polske-lech-kaczynski-w-sierpniu-2008-r-w-tbilisi-zobacz-wideo>.
5. For example, Anna Fotyga, Kaczyński's close collaborator and Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2005-2007, has recently said in an interview that "If Law and Justice were in power, and especially if Lech Kaczyński were still President, the entire situation probably wouldn't have taken place" and that "Lech Kaczyński's foreign policy had a stabilizing effect on Europe, EastCentral Europe especially.", Anna Fotyga, *Gdyby rządził Lech Kaczyński, na Ukrainie nie doszłoby do takiej sytuacji*, *Gazeta.pl* (22 April 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/1.114871.15833819.Fotyga_Gdyby_rzadzil_Lech_Kaczynski_na_Ukrainie.html.
6. See, for example, Jarosław Kaczyński's statements quoted by the portal *Niezależna.pl*; *Kolejna miesięcznica smoleńska. Jarosław Kaczyński ostrzega przed apetytami Rosji*, *Niezależna* (3 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://niezalezna.pl/52725-kolejna-miesiecznica-smolenska-jaroslaw-kaczynski-ostrzega-przed-apetytami-rosji>; *Ukrainę straciliśmy w Smoleńsku. Gdy zabrakło Lecha Kaczyńskiego, w całej UE zabrakło odważnej polityki wobec Rosji*, wPolityce (29 November 2013), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/172328-ukraine-stracilismy-w-smolensku-gdy-zabraklo-lecha-kaczynskiego-w-calej-ue-zabraklo-odwaznej-polityki-wobec-rosji>.
7. Adam Michnik, *Putin bezkarny*, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (19 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: http://wyborcza.pl/1.75968.15645395.Putin_bezkarny.html?disableRedirects=true.
8. Rafał A. Ziemkiewicz, *Zimna wojna? Daj Boże!*, *Do Rzeczy* (27 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://dorzeczy.pl/id.2786/Zimna-wojna-Daj-Boze.html>; Paweł Lisicki, *O czym zapomniał Zachód*, *Do Rzeczy* (14 April 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://lisicki.dorzeczy.pl/id.2941/O-czym-zapomniał-Zachód.html>.
9. *Miliard euro dla Ukrainy: Nam też pomagano*, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (28 February 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: http://wyborcza.pl/1.95892.15545722.Miliard_euro_dla_Ukrainy_Nam_tez_pomagano_LIST_OTWARTY_.html.
10. Dawid Wildstein, *Majdan zniszczył polski Okrągły Stół*, *Niezależna.pl* (26 February 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://niezalezna.pl/52296-majdan-zniszczyl-polski-okragly-stol>.
11. On the left, see among other articles the coverage of the events as well as the commentaries on the portal *Lewica.pl*, (e.g. "Ukraina: Marsze ku pamięci Stepana Bandery - nacjonalisty, kata Polaków") and the comment by Jarosław Klebaniuk 01.01.2014: *Jarosław Klebaniuk, Ukraina: Marsze ku pamięci Stepana Bandery - nacjonalisty, kata Polaków*, *Lewica* (1 January 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.lewica.pl/index.php?id=29012>; *Przemysław Prekiel, Rusofobia*, *Lewica* (16 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://lewica.pl/blog/prekiel/29263/>; many commentaries in the weekly *Przegląd*; Jan Widacki, *Umierać za Sewastopol?*, *Tygodnik Przegląd* (10 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.przegląd-tygodnik.pl/pl/artykul/jan-widacki-umierac-za-sewastopol>; Bronisław Łagowski, *Gorączka ukraińska*, *Tygodnik Przegląd* (10 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.przegląd-tygodnik.pl/pl/artykul/bronislaw-lagowski-goraczka-ukrainska>; Tymoteusz Kochan, *Fałszywy patriotyzm/Fałszywa świadomość*, *Socjalizm Teraz* (06 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL:

- http://www.socjalizmteraz.pl/pl/Artykuly/?id=425/Falszywy_patriotyzm___Falszywa_swiadomosc; On the right, see numerous articles on the portal Kresy.pl devoted to Poland's former territories in the east (including its conflict with the pro-Majdan Niezależna.pl); the nationalist portal Prawy.pl; Robert Winnicki, To nie tylko dramat Ukrainy, ale fiasko doktryny Giedroycia, Prawy (22 January 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.prawy.pl/z-kraju/4767-robert-winnicki-to-nie-tylko-dramat-ukrainy-ale-fiasko-doktryny-giedroycia>; Karol Kaźmierczak, Ukraina trzeszczy w szwach, Prawy (26 January 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.prawy.pl/z-zagranicy/4803-ukraina-trzeszczy-w-szwach>; articles by Father Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski who split with Niezależna.pl on the Ukrainian issue: Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski, Hipokryzja: Michnik i Bauman wspierają rebelię w Kijowie, Fronda (25 January 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.fronda.pl/a/ks-isakowicz-zaleski-hipokryzja-michnik-i-bauman-wspieraja-rebelie-w-kijowie.33867.html>; Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski, Nazista Tiahnybok wkracza na polskie salony, Prawy (12 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.prawy.pl/felieton/5222-nazista-tiahnybok-wkracza-na-polskie-salony>; Dominik Cwikła, Wildstein atakuje Kresy.pl - kto ma interes we wspieraniu banderowców?, Parezja (11 February 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://parezja.pl/wildstein-atakuje-kresy-pl/>.
12. Paweł Lisicki, editor-in-chief of the right-wing weekly Do Rzeczy has commented sourly on this, pointing out that the present government's "abrupt" change of attitudes towards Russia has brought it an (undeserved) rise in popularity, while Jarosław Kaczyński, whose position on Putin's regime has turned out to be correct, doesn't seem to benefit from it; Paweł Lisicki, Nieznośna przewrotność losu, Do Rzeczy (23 March 2014), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://tygodnik.dorzeczy.pl/id.2755/Nieznosna-przewrotnosc-losu.html>. (Incidentally, Jarosław Kaczyński has been among those severely criticized by some right-wing commentators for his Maidan sympathies, which supposedly brought him too close to the banderovcy - see, for example, Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski, Nie pójde w tym roku w marszu z Jarosławem Kaczyńskim, Bibuła (06 December 2013), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.bibula.com/?p=71893>. On the left, the Maidan has found the most visible, if not entirely uncritical support in Krytyka Polityczna (see especially the regular column by the editor of KP's Ukrainian edition Oleksiy Radynski, Krytyka Polityczna, retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/users/oleksyradynski>), while the journal's editor-in-chief Sławomir Sierakowski has been advocating the Ukrainian cause in the New York Times: Sławomir Sierakowski, Europe Needs Ukraine, New York Times (18 November 2013), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/19/opinion/sierakowski-europe-needs-ukraine.html>; Sławomir Sierakowski, Has the West Already Lost Ukraine?, New York Times (26 February 2013), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/26/opinion/has-the-west-already-lost-ukraine.html>; Sławomir Sierakowski, Putin's Useful Idiots, New York Times (29 April 2013), retrieved 3 December 2015, URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/29/opinion/sierakowski-putins-useful-idiots.html>.

