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# Stop forcing Ukraine into a narrative of Moscow versus Washington

We are told that this is a geopolitical battle instead of an attempt by ordinary Ukrainians to take back control from the oligarchs



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A group of Maidan guards outside the parliament building in Kiev. Photograph: Gail-Orenstein/Demotix/Corbis

Anyone who tells you Ukraine is a battle between Russia and the west is wrong. It is a lazy narrative told by ignorant people, but is helping create a genuine tragedy that we should all be concerned about.

The history of Ukraine's crisis began not in February, with Viktor Yanukovich's flight, but in 1991, with independence. Desperate to break communism, privatisers sold state assets as quickly as they could. They didn't care who got them; they just wanted private property to exist. They thought the new owners would insist on their rights, and thus build a stable society, governed by the rule of law.

It was the west that killed that dream. By moving their wealth offshore – to Austria, the Caribbean or the various UK-owned tax havens – Ukraine's property owners could

enjoy western property rights, while benefiting from chaos at home. That turned the privatisers' calculations on their head.

Insiders snatched Ukraine's industries, with particularly powerful business clans in the cities of Donetsk and Dnepropetrovsk. They fought for control of the government in Kiev, but all had the same basic interest: to perpetuate chaos. The longer Ukraine was a mess, the richer they got.

This was not Russia against the west; everyone piled in. Just look at the needless intermediary company created by Dmitry Firtash in 2004 to buy gas from Russia and sell it to Ukraine, making more than \$600m a year. RosUkrEnergo was a west-east joint venture: half owned by Russia's Gazprom, half owned via an Austrian bank. Every dollar it earned was a dollar less for ordinary Ukrainians.

Some would have you believe that Yanukovich was a democratic, pro-Russian president driven out by western spies – yet he held his palaces and hunting estate via British shell companies, and his son's assets were owned through the Netherlands and Switzerland. Ukraine was a modern Prometheus, chained to the ground, while vultures of all geopolitical persuasions companionably pecked at its liver.

The corruption was obscene. Ukraine has Europe's second-highest HIV rate, with 230,000 Ukrainians infected with the virus, yet in 2012 and 2013 more than a fifth of the budget for anti-retrovirals was embezzled through rigged auctions. Anti-corruption campaigners estimate 30% of the annual procurement budget was stolen: that's \$15bn a year, the same amount Ukraine is now begging from the IMF. In the three years of Yanukovich's rule, his son became Ukraine's second richest man. And Yanukovich jailed Yulia Tymoshenko, a political rival who had run against him as president, to show how tough he was.

In the parallel reality of some commentators, she was pro-western and Yanukovich was pro-Russian. In fact she is from Dnepropetrovsk, and he is from Donetsk, and they are both pro-themselves. Ukraine's real political split has always been between different industrial clans, whose placemen dominate parliament. Now Yanukovich has fled, Donetsk has lost power and, by default, Dnepropetrovsk has taken over. Ukrainians did not revolt to swap one business clan for another, however, so they insist on immediate elections. (Tymoshenko is polling in the single figures.)

The protesters are still on the Maidan in central Kiev because this isn't their first revolution. Back in 2004-5 they ousted Yanukovich and elected a president who appointed Tymoshenko to head his government. They trusted her to make things better and went home, but corruption continued. This time they're keeping the pressure on.

Whisper it, but it's working. A new procurement law scraped through the corrupt old

parliament and removes the loopholes that allowed the annual \$15bn to be stolen. Punishments for corruption are tougher, registers on property are better, checks on officials' expenditure are tighter.

This is what the revolution is about: Ukrainians trying to wrest control of their country from the oligarchs of Donetsk, Dnepropetrovsk and elsewhere who – with help from east and west – have robbed them for 23 years. The left should be cheering them on.

The east against west story does have one beneficiary: the Kremlin. In Ukraine Moscow is trying to preserve a crooked regime against the wishes of Ukrainians who want to live with dignity, because the old ways made it money. It also fears a united and stable Ukraine would join Nato. That's why Russia is sheltering Yanukovich, and threatening not to recognise the elections on 25 May. Russia is deploying its propaganda apparatus to present this as an ideological struggle rather than a mercenary one. RT, the channel formerly known as Russia Today, addresses the outside world, while state television channels bombard Russian-speakers with denunciations of the "fascists" in Kiev.

Journalists who grew up in a world when Moscow and the west were equal adversaries feel comfortable in this narrative. It's far easier to sell Ukraine if it's Czechoslovakia 1968, rather than a messy failed state, a European Congo.

With media on all sides forcing Ukraine into a west v east narrative, Ukrainians keep hearing that this battle is geopolitical and inter-ethnic, rather than an attempt by ordinary people to take control of their destinies. There is enough truth in the caricature – west Ukrainians do speak Ukrainian, east Ukrainians do speak Russian – that Ukrainians have started believing it, and started fighting about it. And people got killed. And the propaganda is turning into the truth.

Journalists have a responsibility at a time like this. They should learn what's really happening before making sweeping conclusions. They should remember this is about ordinary Ukrainians, not about Moscow or Washington. And they should be aware that their lazy judgments are tomorrow's incendiary propaganda.



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