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MATLOCK DEBATE in *Krasno Analysis*:
RESPONSES to Badridze, Knight and Kramer
by **Nicolai Petro** and **Anatol Lieven**

Ukraine Must Come to Terms with its Own Diversity:
A Response to Badridze and Knight

(820 words)

Nicolai N. Petro

In his essay, "Ukraine: Tragedy of a Nation Divided," *Krasno Analysis*, 2/2021), Ambassador Jack Matlock reminds us that it is **Ukraine's failure to come to terms with its own regional and cultural diversity, which has led to the current impasse.**

Ambassador **Giorgi Badridze** and journalist **Robin Knight** make very **similar arguments:** Ukraine, they say, is facing an external threat because it has never been at war with itself. The fact that **Russophone Ukrainians** overwhelmingly identify as Ukrainians (a [point I have often made](#) myself), they take to mean that the Russophone Ukrainians also support the Ukrainian government's policies toward them. However,

every poll refutes this (see most devastatingly, [Test na sumisnist](#) ([Compatibility Test], *Zerkalo nedeli*, No.42, Nov. 9-15, 2019).

In order to connect these disparate arguments both Knight and Badridze claim that they form part of **“the Kremlin narrative.”** In fact, however, the possibility that Ukraine’s regional diversity could lead to a rupture in the country’s political fabric was the conventional wisdom in the West, until it became politically inexpedient to say so.

Samuel Huntington once termed Ukraine a **“cleft country,”** and even singled out Crimea as a region of particular contention (*The Clash of Civilizations and Remaking of World Order*, 2007, p.138). As early as 1998, **David Laitin** warned that Russian speakers in Ukraine were organizing to defend their rights (*Identity in Formation*). It is precisely because we now dismiss this wisdom as a Kremlin narrative, that we fail to see the reasons for Ukraine’s persistent political instability.

Most politicians within Ukraine, however, would agree with Ambassador Matlock. As former Ukrainian president [Viktor Yushchenko](#) said recently: “Ukrainians are still a quasi-nation” who simply do not have the traits that are “characteristic of healthy, strong, consolidated nations.”

For him, and other politically well-connected Ukrainian nationalists, there is therefore nothing more important than **eradicating** the **“Fifth Column”** ([Petro Poroshenko](#), [Pavlo Klimkin](#), [Oleksandr Turchinov](#)) of **“cancerous”** ([Oleksii Reznikov](#), [Ihor Lutsenko](#), [Volodymyr Ohryzko](#)), **“backward-looking”** ([Valentin Pristaiko](#), [Georgii Tuka](#), [Pavlo Zhebrivsky](#)), **“faux-Ukrainians”** ([Yuri Andriukhovich](#), [Viktor Yushchenko](#)) in Eastern and Southern Ukraine who are holding Ukraine back.

Some have even convinced themselves that the conflict with Russia is actually a **godsend**. As the long-time Minister of the Interior [Arsen Avakov](#) famously put it, back in 2014, while “war cannot lead to enlightened sentiments, it can lead to a cleansing.”

It is thus Robin Knight and Amb. Badridze, rather than Amb. Matlock who ignore Ukrainian history. Specifically, they **overlook the decades-long struggle of Donbass and Crimea to obtain local cultural autonomy within** Ukraine (on Donbass, see the writings of historians [Hiroake Kuromiya](#), [Marta Studenna-Skrukwa](#), and [David R. Marples](#)).

Crimea, for its part, fought very hard to have its **autonomy enshrined** in the Ukrainian constitution of 1991, although it was largely hollowed out in 1995, when Kuchma substantially revised and reduced the autonomy provisions granted to Crimea in 1991. [Declassified embassy cables show](#), however, that the region’s desire for a further devolution of power was well known to US and UK officials at the time.

But can it be said that the **Crimean referendum of March 16, 2014**, was a *bona fide* choice? No, it cannot. The Crimean referendum, hastily organized with Russian assistance, will always be subject to legal debate, particularly in light of the long conflict between the Ukrainian parliament and the Crimean parliament over which of them held ultimate sovereignty in the Crimean Autonomous Republic. **Their respective constitutions contradict each other.**

A strong case can also be made for the **referendum’s illegality** under international law, although this argument was weakened by the International Court of Justice’s recognition of **Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia**. In this July 22, 2010,

decision, the Court stated, as a matter of principle, that international law contains “no prohibition on declarations of independence.” This gave the Crimean parliament precisely [the argument it needed to secede](#) from Ukraine.

Ultimately, however, these issues will not be resolved by litigation, but **by respecting the will of the peninsula’s inhabitants**. There have been dozens of surveys that have been conducted in Crimea, both before and after 2014, by leading Western pollsters such as [Gerard Toal](#), [John O’Loughlin](#), [Kristin M. Bakke](#) and [Gwendolyn Sasse](#). They leave no doubt whatsoever that **Crimeans of all nationalities currently support the decision to rejoin Russia**.

In sum, Ambassador Matlock has done us a great service by reminding us of Ukraine’s regional diversity, for without it we could not understand why the fundamental principle underlying the Minsk-II Accords is to grant Crimea “special status” or regional autonomy.

Taking advantage of this by **implementing the Minsk-II Accords**, as signed in February 2015, would **also open the door to peaceful relations between Russia and the West**. After all, a Ukraine that can accept its own cultural pluralism, and see it as a source of civic unity, would also be strong enough to resist being drawn into the recurring conflicts that erupt between those cultures.

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The Painful End of Empires: A Response to Kramer, Knight and Badridze (880 words)

Anatol Lieven

I do not have much to add to Nicolai Petro's defense of Ambassador Matlock's article, and in particular his accurate portrait of the internal divisions of Ukraine (see my own analysis in the *Quincy Institute* paper "Ending the Threat of War in Ukraine").

I would only like to ask Mark Kramer and Robin Knight the following questions: Do they support the measures taken by the Ukrainian government over the past three years **to reduce and eventually eliminate the Russian language from government, education and service industries in Ukraine?**

These measures have been **condemned** by an [expert commission](#) of the Council of Europe as incompatible with contemporary European pluralist democracy. **If they do support them**, then they need to explain why Ukrainian mono-ethnic nationalism is somehow better than similar nationalisms that the West has denounced elsewhere in the world. **If they do not**, then they need to admit that Russia's concern for the

position of the Russian and Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine does have some basis in fact.

Concerning Ukraine's international position, Mr. Knight has praised the historic position of **neutral Finland**. I could not agree more. Many of us have been arguing for many years that **formal, internationally-guaranteed neutrality like that of Finland or Austria during the Cold War** is the only viable solution for a divided and contested country like Ukraine (see my 1999 book *Ukraine and Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry*).

Does Mr. Knight in fact support a **treaty of neutrality for Ukraine**? If so, why has he not written publicly in support of this? If he has, then I ask his pardon – but I can find no record of his having done so.

Concerning events in the countries of the former USSR since 1991, some of Mark Kramer's remarks are misleading and tendentious. As I am sure he realizes, **Russia intervened in Tajikistan to defeat Islamist forces** there. Russian forces remain in Tajikistan, at the request of the Tajik government, to help prevent an overspill of extremism and instability from neighboring Afghanistan.

In other words, Russian actions were in the interests of the region, the international community, and indeed the United States, and were **precisely what America would have done in similar circumstances**.

On the broader question of Russian policies in the former USSR: **Russia has indeed committed crimes and made mistakes**. But **the end of empires is invariably a messy business**, that leaves numerous unsolved tensions, disputes and conflicts behind; just ask the French, British, Dutch, Belgians, Portuguese, Spanish and Turks.

All of these former imperial powers committed crimes and made mistakes. That does not mean, however, that guilt for these conflicts was entirely or invariably on their side, or that their attempts to manage the end of empire while defending their own interests reflected wider plans for international aggression.

Concerning Georgia, Mr. Badridze mentions the Sakharov Prize. I am sure that as a Georgian he remembers **Andrei Sakharov's** famous comment about Georgia, that small nations can also have their own imperialisms. **Abkhaz and Ossete nationalists** in their respective autonomous areas certainly acted in the early 1990s with the support of the Soviet and Russian governments. However, I am sure he knows that it was **extreme Georgian ethnic nationalism** in those years which gave them no reason for confidence in their position and rights in an independent Georgia. On repeated occasions it was Georgian forces that initiated violence in these territories.

In December 1990, **Zviad Gamsakhurdia**, Georgia's first democratically elected president in the post-Soviet era, dispatched nationalist volunteers to **South Ossetia** after that territory's declaration of sovereignty, instead of trying to negotiate a new deal on autonomy. In August 1992, it was Georgian militia that invaded **Abkhazia**, committing numerous atrocities including the destruction of museums and the national archives.

And as a [report](#) commissioned by the European Union and based on the evidence of international observers on the ground makes clear, in August 2008 it was the **Georgian army that attacked South Ossetia and Russian forces there**, apparently **in the expectation that America would save Georgia from Russia's response**. America did not do so – a fact that Mr. Badridze would also do well to remember.

Finally, Mr. Badridze attributes Russia's actions in Ukraine purely to the **domestic calculations of President Vladimir Putin**. This is a mistake. For obvious historical, cultural, ethnic, economic and strategic reasons, the desire to prevent Ukraine from becoming part of an anti-Russian alliance is held by the entire Russian establishment and a huge number of ordinary Russians.

A failure to understand this means in turn a drastic underestimation of Russian determination in Ukraine, and of the dangers that we all face there.

In pursuit of that goal, **Russia has indeed committed mistakes and crimes, just as the United States has in Central America** in defense of the Monroe Doctrine, and will doubtless continue to do in future. But to suggest that this reflects the domestic agenda of one US administration is completely to misunderstand both American history and how the bipartisan members of the US foreign and security policy establishment understand the **vital interests** of their country.

If members of the US establishment could honestly recognize this about themselves, they would have a **better chance of reaching a reasonable accommodation with the Russian establishment, which sees the world in very much the same way.**

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