In recent weeks, rational argument concerning Ukraine in both Russia and the West has been overwhelmed by a flood of hysteria, lies and self-deceptions. Russia has engaged in openly mendacious propaganda. Western governments and too much of the media have responded with lying counter-propaganda of their own, argues Anatol Lieven.

There is no space in this essay to dissect all the competing propaganda claims of both sides. Instead, I would direct readers to an excellent article on the subject by the Israeli journalist Ariel Danieli ("From Washington to Moscow, Everyone is Lying About What is happening in Ukraine", March 6th 2014, at www.haaretz.com) .

Among other important points, Danieli writes correctly that while Moscow is lying in describing the overthrow of Yanukovych as a "neo-fascist coup" rather than a popular uprising (albeit against a democratically elected president), Washington is no less mendacious in claiming that "far-right ultranationalist groups are not represented in the Rada [the Ukrainian parliament]" and have no influence over the new government.

This is a grotesque claim, given that the ultra-nationalist and savagely Russophobe Svoboda ("Freedom" party) in fact has 38 seats in parliament and four ministers in the government including Minister of Justice and Deputy Prime Minister. Svoboda's founder, Andriy Parubiy, has become secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, with his ally Dmytro Yarosh, leader of the neo-fascist Right Sector group, as his deputy.

In a resolution of December 13th 2012, the European Parliament declared of Svoboda that:

"MEPs voice concerns about the rising nationalistic sentiment in Ukraine which led to the election of the "Svoboda" Party to the Parliament of Ukraine. The EP recalls that racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic views go against the EU's fundamental values and principles and it appeals to pro-democratic parties in the Ukrainian Parliament not to associate with, endorse or form coalitions with this party." ("Elections failed to Bring Ukraine Closer to EU, Say MEPs", at www.europarl.europa.eu)

It should be clear therefore that while Moscow has grossly exaggerated the immediate physical threat to Russians in Ukraine as justification for its military moves in Crimea, Russians and Russian-speakers do have good reasons to fear for their rights under the new Ukrainian government; and the EU and its member states were premature in recognizing that government and promising it massive aid without first insisting on changes in its composition and firm guarantees of minority rights. Russia has violated international law. The West has violated its own principles and interests.

The real danger in Ukraine does not lie in Crimea. One way or another, Crimea is almost certainly now lost to Ukraine, even if no-one but Russia recognises this formally. The danger comes from the possibility of clashes between the Ukrainian nationalist and neo-fascist volunteers who led the overthrow of the previous government in Kiev and opposing Moscow-backed pro-Russian volunteers in the east of the country. If they get out of hand, such clashes could lead to Russian invasion, war and the partition of Ukraine. It is therefore urgently necessary to recreate in Ukraine an agreed and legitimate democratic process that will safeguard minority rights.

The stakes here are high for all sides. If war begins, Russia would almost certainly win it (since the USA and Britain, despite their attempts to bring Ukraine into Nato, have no intention of fighting to defend the country), but would suffer colossal damage in the process. In the short term there would be a shattering economic crisis. In the longer term, Russia would face a collapse of economic and cultural ties with the west that would drive it inexorably towards the status of a satellite of China—a prospect, by the way, that terrifies liberal and nationalist Russians alike. The result would be a stagnant, closed and increasingly authoritarian Russian system.

The damage to the west would also be considerable. If the west introduced economic sanctions and Russia responded with a massive rise in its gas prices (or if gas supplies to western Europe across Ukraine were cut off by conflict), the result could very easily be a new European and global recession. China would benefit greatly from the acquisition of Russia as an unconditional ally, and from the sheer distraction of US attention that war would bring. Propping up the remains of Ukraine economically would be a massive financial burden for the EU. And the sight of the USA and Nato again standing impotently by while a quasi-ally is defeated in a war for which western policy was partly responsible would be a humiliation that would embolden America's global rivals.

It is important to remember that Ukraine is a deeply divided society that cannot make a categorical choice between the west and Russia without tearing itself apart. Since independence, a sense of common identity and loyalty has certainly developed, but it remains fragile and ambiguous.

The reasons for this lie not in recent policies but in the historic division from the 13th century onwards of the ancient lands of Rus between the Tsardom of Muscovy, the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom and, to the south, the steppe, disputed between Crimean Tatars and Ukrainian Cossacks, and largely uninhabited until it was conquered by the Russian Empress Catherine the Great in the 18th century.

From the 17th century on, the Ukrainian-speaking parts of Poland-Lithuania were progressively conquered by the Russian Empire, leading many Orthodox Ukrainians to strongly identify with Russia. This process was completed by Stalin's annexation of Polish Galicia and Volhynia in 1939—a region that had never been under Russian imperial rule and which remains the most strongly nationalist and anti-Russian part of Ukraine today.

One way of explaining the resulting Ukrainian identities and relationship to Russia to a British audience would be to say that they include elements of both the Scottish and the Irish historical experience in Britain. On the one hand, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union severely repressed Ukrainian nationalism (beyond purely symbolic forms), and persecuted Ukrainians belonging to the "apostate" religious tradition of the Uniates (Orthodox who, under Polish rule, had acknowledged the supremacy of the Pope). On the other hand, both in Russia and in the Soviet Union, "loyal" Ukrainians permeated the state system and rose to its highest echelons.

In the field of literature, the distinction is symbolised by Ukraine's two greatest 19th-century writers. Nikolai Gogol ("Mykola Hohol" in Ukrainian) could be seen as analogous to writers such as Walter Scott and John Buchan, conscious of their Scottish identity and often writing on Scottish themes, but loyal to Britain and the British Empire. The Ukrainian nationalist poet Taras Shevchenko, in contrast, more closely resembles 19th-century Irish nationalist writers such as James Clarence Mangan or Arthur Geoghegan—though since Britain had been able to crush

the Irish language much more effectively than the Russian Empire had crushed Ukrainian, these Irish writers also wrote in English.

In a pattern familiar from the British Empire, Russian and Soviet rule also brought about huge and complex patterns of migration. Large parts of southern Ukraine were settled by Russians (and by Germans invited in by Catherine, until Stalin deported them to Central Asia). More Russians moved later to work in the mines and factories. At the same time, however, millions of Ukrainians migrated to Siberia and the Russian Far East, where (the last time I checked) a majority of senior officials and local deputies had Ukrainian surnames. The difference was that under rule from St Petersburg and Moscow, Ukrainians who moved to what is now Russia soon gave up the Ukrainian language and merged into the Russian population; whereas Russians who moved to Ukraine not only kept their language but through intermarriage helped the state extend the Russian language to much of the neighbouring Ukrainian population.

As a result of Ukraine's history, some 17 percent of Ukrainians consider themselves ethnic Russians, while around a third of Ukrainians speak Russian as their first language. These figures, however, mask a more complex reality. For instance, in Dnipropetrovsk I met one Russian-speaking man with a Russian surname who spoke Russian at home, but who considered himself ethnic Ukrainian because he was brought up by his Ukrainian stepfather after his Russian father walked out. I also met an "ethnic Russian" with a Ukrainian surname who considered himself Russian because he was brought up as such by his Russian-speaking Armenian mother. Both said that their political identity was Ukrainian, and both strongly believed in Ukraine seeking close relations with both Russia and the west.

The result of this history is that a great majority of western (and increasingly, central) Ukrainians find it intolerable that Ukraine should form part of a Russian-dominated economic and political bloc. A majority of eastern and southern Ukrainians, for their part, find it intolerable that they should be separated from Russia by a hard international frontier (including a tight, EU-mandated visa regime) and that the Ukrainian state should insist on a version of Ukrainian identity and culture that they do not share and which is, in part, deeply hostile to them. These two identities have dominated Ukrainian politics since independence, with elections decided by small shifts in the middle ground between them, represented by people like my two acquaintances from Dnipropetrovsk.

The problem for the west is that while many of the pro-western Ukrainian forces are genuinely committed to western-style reforms, others are traditional nationalists who look to Nato and the EU for protection against Russia, without sharing mainstream liberal values. This may either make Ukraine's integration into the west impossible or (as has already occurred in the case of Hungary) import into the EU forces which will ally with western European neo-fascist parties.

The problem for Russia in eastern and southern Ukraine is that a desire to keep the Russian language and close ties with Russia can co-exist with a desire for closer ties with the EU (though not with Nato). It is not at all the same thing as a desire simply to become part of Russia or even a subordinate member of a Russian alliance.

An analogy here might be drawn with the "Anglosphere" tendency in English-speaking countries. A large majority of British, Australian and Canadian citizens desire (to varying degrees) close relations with the United States, and would reject the idea of joining an anti-American alliance. But this does not indicate a desire for unconditional subordination to the US.

Similarly, to judge by my own travels in eastern and southern Ukraine, outside Crimea, even many people there who are strongly hostile to the new government in Kiev would also be deeply hostile to Russian military intervention and the partition of the country. Russian threats of intervention may well be frightening more Russian-speakers in Ukraine than they reassure.

Ever since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, both the Yeltsin and the Putin administrations have made assiduous attempts to keep Ukraine in Russia's orbit. This has been very costly for Russia—just as from now on, a serious attempt to draw Ukraine into the west's orbit is going to be costly for the west.

Until 2005, Russia supplied Ukraine with gas at well below world market prices, amounting to aid to Ukraine of between $3bn and $5bn a year, at a time when Russia itself was undergoing a terrible economic crisis. This was several times the average annual aid from the west during those years. Indeed, all EU aid put together from 1991 to 2013 came to a mere $4.6bn. Ukraine's failure to pay its gas bill even at subsidised prices led to repeated disputes and

interruptions of Russian supplies—to which Ukrainian governments responded by diverting gas from supplies heading for the EU.

In 2010, Russia agreed to reduce the price of its gas to 30 percent below world market levels (but rising to those levels gradually over several years), as part of a deal by which the newly-elected government of President Yanukovych agreed to extend the Russian lease of the naval base of Sevastopol in Crimea to 2042.

In December 2013, as part of the bidding war with the EU over whether to join the Eurasian Union or sign an association agreement with the EU, Russia signed a deal with Yanukovych reducing the price of its gas by a third. It also gave $15bn to help Ukraine meet its international debt repayments. This, too, was vastly greater than anything on offer from the EU as part of the association agreement, and equally importantly came with no conditions for reform.

Following the revolution, the EU is also now discussing a $15bn aid package for Ukraine (which has asked for $35bn)—something that, had it been presented to European governments before the revolution, would have been rejected out of hand. What the EU cannot match—because western European countries will not tolerate it—is something that Russia has allowed Ukraine ever since independence, namely free labour movement. As a result, the three million or more Ukrainian citizens working legally in Russia today outnumber those allowed to work legally in the EU at least 10 times over.

What this history illustrates is that until a few weeks ago, Ukraine was of very minor importance for the EU, whereas for Russia it was always a priority. It would have been well if EU leaders had understood this before devising their policies—but then the EU has always been poor at thinking strategically.

The Russians, however, have made a mistake of equal magnitude. Russian officials have been exasperated by the way in which their generosity to Ukraine has repeatedly led to few benefits for Russia, while a growing number of Ukrainians have supported closer relations with the EU despite the much smaller short-term advantages on offer. What Russian officials have failed to

recognise is that Ukrainians have become increasingly disgusted with their own oligarchical elites, and see entry into a bloc dominated by a corrupt and semi-authoritarian Russia as permanently consolidating an already rotten system.

The EU has made what is in some respects the opposite mistake where the latest Ukrainian uprising is concerned. Most western analysts have explained the desire of central European populations to join the EU in terms of a wish to westernise their polities, economies and cultures. But they have underestimated the degree to which this was driven by a nationalist yearning to escape the hated Soviet-Russian yoke.

As a consequence, they have not understood to what extent it was this nationalism that allowed the acceptance by populations of the extremely painful economic and cultural changes necessary to join the EU. If they rejected these changes, even conservative and populist central Europeans who opposed westernisation feared that they would find themselves once again under the domination of Moscow. But as we have seen in Hungary, Poland and elsewhere, once safely in Nato and the EU, strong chauvinist tendencies re-emerged, encouraged by deep popular anger at the corruption and social inequality which accompanied the economic revolutions of the 1990s.

Due to the drawing of new frontiers after the First World War, and ethnic cleansing after the Second, most of the central European states are at least ethnically homogenous with united national identities (the chief exception being the former Yugoslavia). Ukrainian identity, as we have seen, is deeply divided, albeit in complex and ambiguous ways.

This leaves the EU after the recent Ukrainian revolution in a situation which may well prove horribly expensive, extremely dangerous and deeply unpopular. Until February 2014, the EU's position (quite rightly) was that to qualify for closer European ties and greater EU aid, Ukraine had to implement a set of deep and very painful reforms. Now, this pressure will have to be largely abandoned for fear that any such changes would drive the populations of eastern and southern Ukraine into the arms of Moscow. On the contrary, the west is contemplating enormous aid packages to Ukraine with no real strings attached.

This in turn means that—unless the EU is prepared simply to tear up the acquis communautaire for the sake of Ukrainian entry, and infuriate western European populations in the process—Ukraine will not in the foreseeable future be able to join the EU, at which point much of the promise behind the Ukrainian revolution collapses.

It was a highly symbolic move, therefore, for the new Ukrainian government to appoint a number of Russian-speaking oligarchs to governorships in eastern Ukraine. This is a wise political move intended to reassure the local populations and win over the eastern Ukrainian elites. It is not, however, obviously compatible with the government's commitment to economic reform.

The result of all this is likely to be Ukraine stuck in a permanent and miserable halfway-house to the EU, like Turkey but without Turkey's independent economic dynamism. In these circumstances, it may not be too long before many Ukrainians hold the EU responsible for betraying them, while the new state oligarchs steal western aid as their predecessors stole Russian aid. Remember: the majorities in Ukrainian opinion polls have been for membership of the EU, with all its benefits—not for an endless accession process.

So far, however, it is Russia that has suffered a crushing defeat, compared to which anything suffered so far by the west is minor, and Crimea is a very small consolation prize. Putin's plans for the consolidation of Russia's economic and political influence in the former Soviet region and economic role on the world stage centred on the creation of the Eurasian Union including Ukraine. Without Ukraine, this bloc cannot possibly emerge as a significant international grouping. The demonstrators in Kiev have killed forever the plan for Ukraine to enter the Eurasian Union. On the other hand, as we have seen, Ukraine's path towards the EU is also strewn with obstacles, and can also easily be blocked by Russia through its influence over parts of Ukraine.

In these circumstances, it seems to me sensible and a recognition of reality if, as part of a Ukrainian settlement, Russia, Nato and the EU help to reduce the tension in Ukraine, and between Russia and the west, by declaring a lengthy moratorium on any new offer of accession or partnership. They should also propose an amendment to the Ukrainian constitution stipulating that Ukraine's accession to any international organisation needs a majority of at least 70 percent in a referendum.

Above all, it is necessary to reduce tension within Ukraine and prevent possible clashes between Ukrainian nationalist and Russian-backed militias, which could lead to full-scale Russian invasion.

The Russian annexation of Crimea is both a very serious crime under international law and a dreadful mistake from Russia's own point of view. This does not however diminish the necessity to prevent conflict in the rest of Ukraine. This requires above all agreement between the west and Russia, and between the new government in Kiev and former supporters of President Yanukovych from the east and south, on how to hold new elections, and on the shape of a new Ukrainian constitution. As part of this agreement, anti-government groups in eastern Ukraine would call off their attempts to storm government buildings and oust officials appointed from Kiev (though of course from their point of view, they are only following the model set by the groups which ousted President Yanukovych).

The west should make greatly increased aid to Ukraine conditional on the following moves by the government in Kiev: the ministers and deputy ministers of the interior, defence and justice, and the secretary and deputy secretary of the National Security Council, should be neutral professional officers until after the next elections; an agreement that these elections should take place under close United Nations supervision, to prevent rigging and intimidation by either Ukrainian nationalist or pro-Russian militias. As it has in other deeply divided countries, the international community should constrain Ukraine to adopt a new federal constitution, restoring the election of governors and granting real local power to the different regions.

It is both dangerous and wrong in principle that a state as diverse as Ukraine should have a highly centralised constitution under which, for example, the new Ukrainian parliament could pass a law (subsequently blocked by the president under discreet western pressure) abolishing the official status of Russian and other minority languages, not only at the national level but in provinces where a large majority of the population speaks Russian as its first language. These proposals are not "concessions" to Russia; they are in accordance with the west's own interests and values.

Henry Kissinger, one of the very few senior American figures to have kept their heads in this crisis, wrote earlier this year: "Far too often the Ukrainian issue is posed as a showdown: whether Ukraine joins the east or the west. But if Ukraine is to survive and thrive, it must not be either side's outpost against the other—it should function as a bridge between them."
It has been demonstrated beyond doubt that neither Russia nor the west can achieve their maximal goals in Ukraine. What they can do, however, is to work endlessly to block each other's goals—and to destroy Ukraine in the process.

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