

Book Review:**“The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know” by Serhy Yekelchuk¹**

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The ongoing crisis in Ukraine first entered the spotlight of international media in late 2013 and remains one of the top global concerns. In this work, a University of Victoria historian Serhy Yekelchuk provides timely and concise, yet informative answers to commonly asked questions.

Dealing with a number of themes dating back as far as the ninth century, the author sets out the historical background to today's conflict in Ukraine. By engaging carefully selected topics in history with contemporary issues, Yekelchuk allows the reader to unscramble the multitude of references routinely utilized in Ukraine's political discourse.

The introductory chapter depicts the current conflict as a three-pronged event, connecting the dots between the mass anti-government protests in Ukraine's capital in November 2013 (p. 3) and the subsequent annexation of Crimea (p. 4) followed by a military conflict in the Donbas (p. 5).

Following a brief introduction, *The Conflict in Ukraine* proceeds chronologically from the birth of statehood on the territory of modern Ukraine in the ninth century to the latest events up to around March 2015, with over half of the book dealing with independent Ukraine (1991–present).

This work makes a good reference book since chapters and individual questions are independent from each other and can be consulted in any order. The issues discussed are diverse and range from the peculiarities of Austro-Hungarian rule to poisoning of the presidential candidate

¹ Yekelchuk, Serhy, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Yushchenko in 2004.

Due to its goals and the limitations of the format, *The Conflict in Ukraine* does not seek to present a novel interpretation. Instead, this heavily descriptive work relies on credible and well-accepted facts and views. Those well familiar with Ukraine's history and current events will hardly find any new information presented in the book. This work is specifically tailored for the reader with little to no familiarity with Ukraine. Its greatest value is in providing the background behind and the basics of current events in a convenient and highly readable form.

The stance of the author on the current crisis is not easy to discern. First, Yekelchuk writes in a descriptive rather than argumentative fashion and does not provide his assessment of the crisis until the very last paragraph. In the concluding statement, Yekelchuk proclaims that the conflict in Ukraine is a global one and defines the future of post-Soviet space (p. 165). The second reason has to do with moderation and balance with which the author approaches the subject matter. To name a few examples, the estimate of Holodomor victims Yekelchuk aligns with the conservative estimate of 3 to 3.5 million deaths (p. 48). The author carefully acknowledges the role of UPA during WWII while condemning the killing of civilians and ethnic cleansing in Volhynia (p. 55).

In a decidedly non-partisan manner, Yekelchuk describes Ukraine's economic system as "crony capitalism" (p. 77). When discussing *Euromaidan*, Yekelchuk recognizes the importance of the far right in mass protests but does not glorify them (p. 105).

Despite the aforementioned strengths, the first edition of the book has its weaknesses. The author's explanation of the East–West divide in Ukraine is nuanced but incomplete. Yekelchuk goes to extraordinary lengths to explain Ukrainian regionalism, elaborating on ethnic, linguistic, historical and economic structure of Ukraine. In doing so, he rejects the portrayal of Ukraine being divided into pro-Western and pro-Russian halves as "convenient simplification" and argues that that the three-fourths of Ukraine outside of its westernmost part are "diverse and fluid" (p. 20). This

argument is not without merit, considering the 180-degree turn in electoral patterns from the 1990s when the vote of the non-Western Ukraine was diametrically opposed to that of its Western counterpart to the most recent elections of 2014 when the majority of Ukrainians in the non-western part aligned themselves electorally with Ukraine's West.

However, this assessment is problematic in that it underplays the importance of a long-standing divide between the East and the West that, in different variations, roughly separates Ukraine in half. Contra to Yekelchik's claim, it can be argued that despite the recent political changes since the 1990s, the old divides splitting Ukraine roughly in two halves play a vital role. The examples of such divides include the geographic borders of the Pontic-Caspian steppe as well as the respective civilizational divide between nomads and settlers, and the political divide between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Tsardom of Russia after the Truce of Andrusovo in 1667. While not providing any single clear-cut boundary, the divides taking place in the center rather than in the West of Ukraine occupy an important place in both Ukrainian historiography and political science.

Second, when discussing the degree of assimilation of Ukrainians in the East into Russian, Yekelchik relies on the census data reporting mother tongue, a category that has been criticized in ethnolinguistic research (e.g. Khmelko 2004). The numbers on mother tongue quoted by Yekelchik are easily misinterpreted by non-specialists as referring to the language that is actually spoken (or was spoken in childhood) by the respondents, whereas they are used as a weak ethnic marker in the Southeast (i.e. Russian-speaking Ukrainians listing Ukrainian as their mother tongue). Therefore, the readers unaware of this detail are likely to underestimate the degree of Russification in the East when relying solely on the census data on mother tongue. For example, the 2001 census shows that 31.77% of the Kharkiv residents listed Ukrainian as their mother tongue (<http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua>). This can create an impression of a city where almost a third of the population speaks Ukrainian. However, an independent study by Sovik (2007) revealed that percentages of the actual

use of Ukrainian in Kharkiv range from 9.3% at home (p. 333) to a mere 1.9% with strangers on the street (the latter number shows a combined result of “only Ukrainian” and “mostly Ukrainian”) (2007, pp. 336-337). Consequently, the data used by Yekelchuk aligns better with the thesis of the author about non-Western Ukraine being “diverse and fluid” than the stable and linguistically homogeneous realities of Ukraine’s urban East.

At the same time, the recent events such as the surge of Ukrainian patriotism in the stereotypically Eastern provinces outside the Donbas, most notably the powerful opposition to the aggression in Dnipropetrovsk and the failed occupation of the Kharkiv province might well prove Yekelchuk’s thesis to have great contemporary relevance and explanatory power. Therefore, the weakness of the book is not the thesis itself but rather the author presenting it as though alternative explanations do not exist.

It is worth mentioning that having introduced the notion of “Two Ukraines” in the homonymous monograph (Krytyka, 2003), a Ukrainian intellectual Mykola Riabchuk himself now argues for fluidity and diversity of Ukraine’s divides (see “The “Two Ukraines” Reconsidered: The End of Ukrainian Ambivalence”, Krytyka, April 2015). Considering the recent events that surprised many and challenged long-held assumptions, Yekelchuk’s work might solidify the interpretational reconsideration captured by the title of Riabchuk’s article.

Third, the book uses some unconventional names. For instance, Khreshchatyk Street is referred to as Khreshchatyk Boulevard (p. 1, 2, 91). Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is referred to as “Ukrainian Catholic Church” (p. 31), a confusing name given the presence of both Greek and Roman Catholic churches in Ukraine).

Fourth, the book would have benefited from listing more sources. Although most facts presented are not in any way controversial, students of Ukraine would have benefited from more extensive footnotes in addition to the list of suggested sources.

Finally, there are several unfortunate typos and errors. The dates of Volodymyr’s reign are 980-1015 and not 980-1050 (xviii). The expiration

date of the Crimean treaty governing Russia's use of the naval base in Crimea was in 2017 and not 2016 (p. 101). Other misspellings that will hopefully be corrected in the next editions include “descendent” in place of “descendant” (p. 120), “free reign” instead of “free rein” (p. 43).

That being said, this timely volume provides an excellent starting point for exploration of the conflict of Ukraine in the context of its history and politics in the global perspective.