

BOOK REVIEW

Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis – What It Means for the West*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014, 236 pages, ISBN: 978-0-300-21159-7

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A leading expert in Ukrainian studies, as well as a respected commentator on Eastern Europe, Andrew Wilson provided us with a new valuable asset in the field when he wrote *Ukraine Crisis – What It Means for the West*. The book represents an exhaustive overview of the tumultuous events that took place in Ukraine in the dramatic year of 2014. Apart from the comprehensive portrait of the Euromaidan uprising, Wilson outlines in great detail an account of Russia's involvement in the crisis, as well as of the challenges and implications that the crisis poses at a global scale.

Although it is a book about Ukraine's turmoil, the author's explanatory power goes beyond the events in the country as he perceives its complex and multifaceted causes and effects. In this respect, Wilson perceives the events in Ukraine beyond a national approach, describing it as a regional and global major challenge. Thus, the crisis is about much more than Ukraine, it is about: "Russia's making" and "future", the direct threat to the "post-Cold War security order", "a major crisis for Europe", "a test for the U.S.", "the future prospects of the entire region" and a constituent part of "a cycle of global protests".

Divided into ten chapters, the book focuses on general implications, "albeit with lots of local detail". The first two chapters set the geopolitical context around Ukraine, emphasising the realities within Ukraine's immediate neighbours: the EU and Russia. From the beginning of the first chapter, the author sets a timeframe, with the year 2008 as a starting point, "the New Year Zero" and culminating with the Vilnius Summit, the event that sparked the protest in Kiev. Overall, Wilson outlines the EU's need for a renewed vigour and sense of purpose, together with the necessity to learn how to deal with traditional hard powers, namely with Russia.

The second chapter is constructed as a harsh critique of the Russian diplomacy and political system, which is mainly identified with the leader in Kremlin. For the author, to understand modern Russia is to understand the defective political system created by Putin. Thus, Russia's humiliation has

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internal causes, being produced by “the very weird people” in power, not by external Western forces.

As the first two chapters shape the political environment around Ukraine, prior to the crisis, the third one focuses on the inside of the country, thus, on analysing the system created by the leader in Kiev. The author also argues that the main cause of turning the protest into violence were the repressive laws and Yanukovych’s schemes.

The next two chapters, namely the 4th and 5th, represent a vivid account of the Ukrainian revolution, portrayed as a “Gettysburg on the Maidan”. In chapter 6, Wilson pays specific attention to the annexation of Crimea, considering it the “real coup”, where Russian troops seized key installations, with the Tartars as the biggest losers.

Whereas the next two chapters proceed towards the next acts of drama in Eastern Ukraine, the last two chapters outline the possible consequences of the crisis, moving the spotlight back on Russia and its confrontation with the West, regarding their “shared space”. In his final chapters, Wilson warns readers about Russia’s imperialistic ambitions which might target other ex-Soviet regions and countries on the European continent in the future. Wilson’s main concluding remark is that the “dichotomy of the West’s ineffective soft power versus Russia’s fragile hard power” does not represent a “recipe for stability” and consequently, the Ukrainian crisis is far from over.

Throughout his book, Wilson transmits that the Ukraine crisis has been and will continue to be a major event with global implications, as the stakes are high not only for Ukraine, but also “around Ukraine”. Overall, the book is well-written and offers us a comprehensive picture of: the internal and external factors that precipitated the crisis; the involvement of the Russian Federation, in both the revolution, as well as in the Crimea annexation and the Donbas civil war; a synthesis of the main challenges of the Ukrainian episode, at the national, regional and global level.

Wilson has gained the status of a genuine expert on Ukraine as his earlier works *Ukrainian nationalism in the 1990’s* (1997), *The Ukrainians* (2002) and *Ukraine’s Orange revolution* (2005) offered him the legitimacy and reputation of a refined observer, thus being the most anticipated and awaited scholar to write about the events in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the current book represents a break from his previous work, taking into consideration its genre and tone. Unlike in his earlier studies, in this book, Wilson is not the objective historian we were used to, but a direct participant in the midst of events. This change of tone is partly due to the fact that Wilson was indeed involved in the crisis, being present in Kiev when the protests reached the highest point. Thus, his well-known style has changed into a mixture of academic writing and journalism, an “on the scene” account of the events, as well as an extensive explanation of why the story is far from being over.

Although the book has been already praised and appreciated within the international scientific community, it has also raised various debates and controversies. Therefore, an overview of the existing book reviews on *Ukraine Crisis – What It Means for the West* highlights four main limits of Wilson's latest work.

First, the book has often been criticised for not being a well-sourced and systematic analysis of the events, which diminishes its scientific value. Indeed, throughout the book, there are many web-sources, anonymous interviews, wrong data and figures, coupled with plenty of allegations and assumptions rather than proof. Nevertheless, the excessive allegations and lack of data could be explained by Wilson's "on the scene" perspective which ultimately gives him legitimacy at least on some of his assumptions.

Second, a careful audit of the book might suggest that Wilson does not offer a balanced assessment of the causes and events that precipitated the crisis. It has been criticised for insisting more on one side of the story, thus omitting certain events and figures that might shed some negative light on the Ukrainian military actions during the civil war, or on Poroshenko's government. For example, important arguments regarding the economic consequences of an eventual Association Agreement are omitted, the focus being exclusively devoted to cultural issues. Nevertheless, the heavy-industrialised Eastern part of Ukraine has strong economic ties with Russia, and therefore, free trade with the EU was not on everybody's agenda.

Third, the book lacks a regional perspective. It carefully unfolds the events in Kiev, although the Euromaidan took place in many regions across the country.

Fourth, although Wilson specifically mentions that this is not an "anti-Russia" book, at times, it seems that it is at least an anti-Putin book. Throughout the text, the largest part of the blame for the situation in Ukraine lies with two main protagonists: Putin and Yanukovich. At times, it does seem that Wilson focuses excessively on blaming Russia instead of looking deeper within the complex palette of causes and actors involved.

Overall, despite the criticism, this book remains a reliable guide of the tumultuous events set in motion in 2014 in Ukraine. As Wilson says, it is not certain whether the "crisis will mark the end of the post-Cold War world order" or the "beginning of a transformation to something more". Nevertheless, one thing is certain: the Ukrainian crisis is far from being over, as "the dust will not settle for a long time". Thus, in its essence, the book has a real explanatory and predictive power through topic, methodology and "on the scene" style, which makes Wilson's latest book a true landmark in literature. Through the vivid picture it creates, the book in question incites and becomes mandatory for any person who is interested in deeply understanding the dramatic events that shook Ukraine and the global stage during 2014 and beyond.