As tensions continue to grow over the Russian occupation of the Crimea, John Chisholm assesses the ethnic and political factors which threaten to pull the Ukraine apart

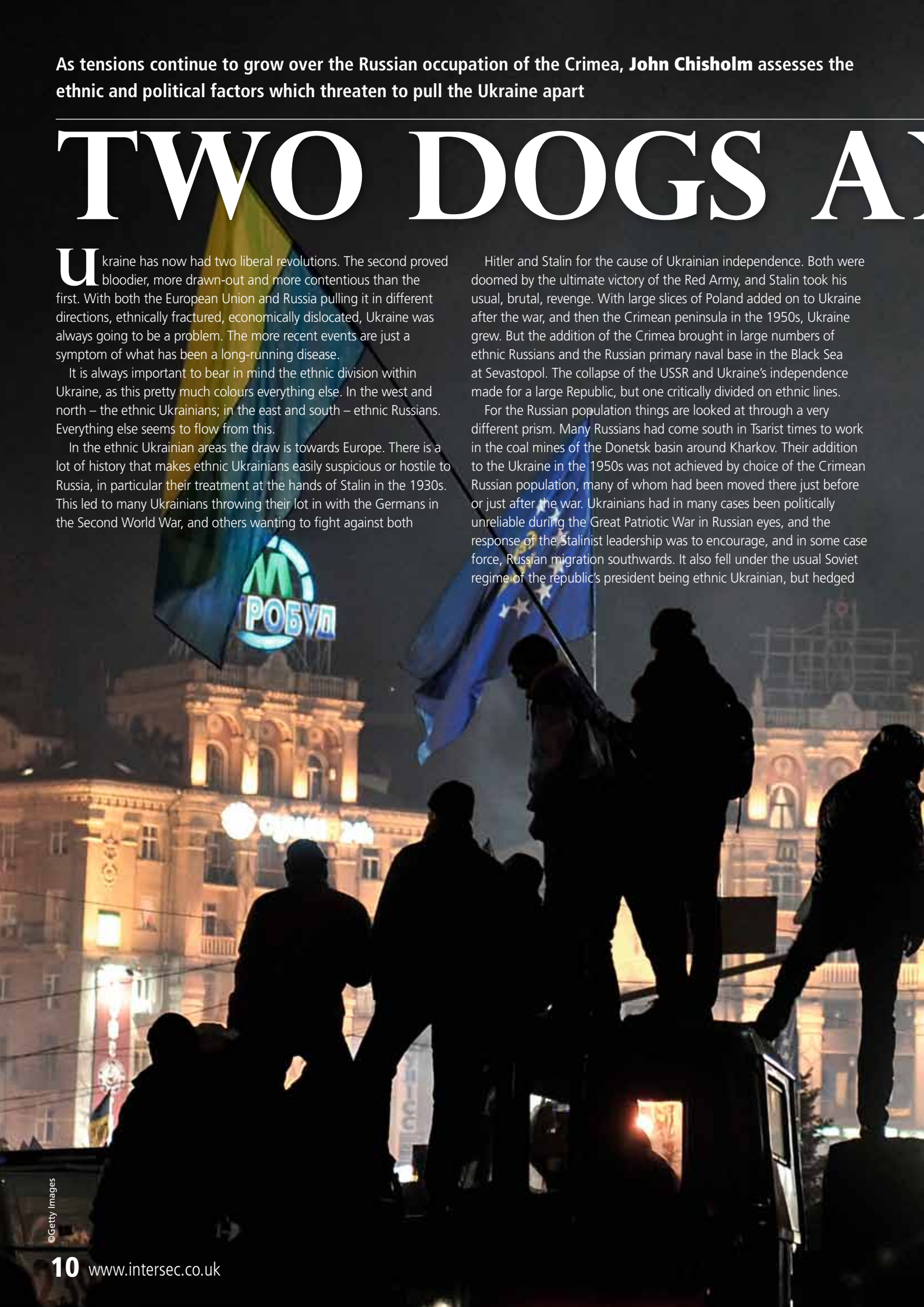
TWO DOGS A

Ukraine has now had two liberal revolutions. The second proved bloodier, more drawn-out and more contentious than the first. With both the European Union and Russia pulling it in different directions, ethnically fractured, economically dislocated, Ukraine was always going to be a problem. The more recent events are just a symptom of what has been a long-running disease.

It is always important to bear in mind the ethnic division within Ukraine, as this pretty much colours everything else. In the west and north – the ethnic Ukrainians; in the east and south – ethnic Russians. Everything else seems to flow from this.

In the ethnic Ukrainian areas the draw is towards Europe. There is a lot of history that makes ethnic Ukrainians easily suspicious or hostile to Russia, in particular their treatment at the hands of Stalin in the 1930s. This led to many Ukrainians throwing their lot in with the Germans in the Second World War, and others wanting to fight against both Hitler and Stalin for the cause of Ukrainian independence. Both were doomed by the ultimate victory of the Red Army, and Stalin took his usual, brutal, revenge. With large slices of Poland added on to Ukraine after the war, and then the Crimean peninsula in the 1950s, Ukraine grew. But the addition of the Crimea brought in large numbers of ethnic Russians and the Russian primary naval base in the Black Sea at Sevastopol. The collapse of the USSR and Ukraine's independence made for a large Republic, but one critically divided on ethnic lines.

For the Russian population things are looked at through a very different prism. Many Russians had come south in Tsarist times to work in the coal mines of the Donetsk basin around Kharkov. Their addition to the Ukraine in the 1950s was not achieved by choice of the Crimean Russian population, many of whom had been moved there just before or just after the war. Ukrainians had in many cases been politically unreliable during the Great Patriotic War in Russian eyes, and the response of the Stalinist leadership was to encourage, and in some case force, Russian migration southwards. It also fell under the usual Soviet regime of the republic's president being ethnic Ukrainian, but hedged



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around with Russian deputies and advisors. These decisions were, of course, predicated on the idea that the USSR would last forever.

This ethnic split was further reinforced by economics. The coal mined in the north and east went north into Russia, fuelling Moscow and other large cities. But the agricultural produce of the south and west had been the Tsarist export trade through Odessa and out to the west. Collectivisation created chaos in Ukrainian agriculture, and the coal industry continued to be dependent on exports to Russia, receiving machinery and pit props in return. The end of the USSR threw this all out of kilter. The economy faltered.

We now hear a lot about gas. Ukraine is totally dependent on Russia for its natural gas. It has no reserves of its own, but this was fine when deliveries were guaranteed under the Soviet system. Indeed, Moscow never cut supplies to the west, even at the height of the Cold War, being very keen to honour contracts in good capitalistic fashion. Independent Russia under Putin has not been so shy in using this lever to extract conditions from weaker neighbours in his "near abroad", and Ukraine in particular has been a target of this "hydrocarbon bomb".

Currently there are no alternative supplies for Ukraine to choose from. A new pipeline could be built from Iran, but this is a long-term solution and does not allow Kiev to escape the gun pointed at its head. Kiev could put the clock back and rely on coal to both fuel power stations and create gas instead (the old "town gas" that fuelled much of Europe until the 1970s). This would be catastrophic environmentally, however, and would require far greater investment than Ukraine could ever afford. In other words, no matter what the future holds, Kiev and Moscow will be joined by the gas supply.

After the chaos and collapse of the Yeltsin period, Putin did bring a much-needed injection of stability. There was no chance of him being too drunk to get off a plane and meet an Irish prime minister, for example. Instead, he rebuilt the country based on increasing hydrocarbon wealth, reining in the oligarchs and gradually extending central state control over the media and the regions. This is controlled crony capitalism, with a population lulled by old-style nationalism, anti-Western propaganda and attacks on minority groups like homosexuals and Muslims.

Claims that there is a Slavic, particularistic way of doing politics that is different – and superior – to the cultural and political liberalism of the West are central to Putin's politics. This has also been key to his strategic aim to maintain close control over the former Soviet republics – the near abroad. But in this he is assailed by three separate, and in many ways mutually hostile, movements.

Eastwards is the growing economic and political weight of China. This has already made itself felt in Chinese links to Central Asian republics like Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan. In addition, the thinly populated Russian territory bordering China looks increasingly under pressure from illegal Chinese trade and immigration. To the south Russia faces a more violent threat: that of Muslim separatism. This has brought terror into the heart of Moscow and does not look certain to dissipate any time soon.

But the pressure on Ukraine comes from the west. Here Nato and the European Union have been expanding eastwards. Moscow was in no position to do anything about the accession of the former Warsaw Pact states to either organisation. Neither could they do a great deal about the three Baltic Republics, and these have effectively been written off. But the two much larger Republics sandwiched in between Russian and the EU are a different matter.

One is Belarus. This has been ruled since 1994 by President Lukashenko, continually re-elected since in polls that are generally considered rigged. Usually described as "the last dictatorship in Europe", Belarus holds Europe's lowest position in the Democracy Index rating. Lukashenko describes himself as having an "authoritarian ruling style", and the relationship

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between Minsk and Moscow is exceptionally close. Lukashenko is the ideal leader in the eyes of the Kremlin, as he supports Russia and guarantees stability.

But Belarus is over 80 per cent ethnic Belorussians, and the next largest minority is Russian; only three per cent of the population are Polish. Ukraine is radically different. Here, the Putin doctrine relies heavily on the Russian population, which makes up around 20 per cent, helping to elect Russian-facing presidents and endorse treaties regarding a continual Russian military presence at Sevastopol – along with the unsubtle lever of natural gas supplies. But this approach was, and has proven to be again in a spectacular way, inherently unstable.

The cause of this instability is that, unlike Belarus, Ukraine is unevenly divided on ethnic lines. At least a proportion of ethnic Ukrainians – the ones most "Russified" and generally not speaking Ukrainian – still look to Moscow. But a look at the spread of votes during the last presidential election, compared to the linguistic spread over the country, is pretty much a direct read-across. Given the economic state of the country, the presidency has flipped between one faction and the other dictated by a small number of swing voters. For the ethnic Ukrainians, though, there is another show in town. If the ethnic Russians look to Moscow, the Ukrainians can increasingly look to Brussels.

It takes a considerable stretch of the imagination to see the EU as an expansive, imperialistic power as portrayed by some politicians in Moscow. But it has to be admitted that it has fought very hard to expand its influence in Kiev, and once it thought that Ukraine was in the EU's corner through a trade treaty, it proved to be very tenacious in trying to keep hold of it. European politicians visited Kiev to march and demonstrate, meeting opposition politicians. European leaders were vocal in their condemnation of the violent suppression of the demonstrations (while in Moscow voices made it clear that it was felt Yanukovych had not gone far enough) and offered lifelines of support for the opposition, backed up by Washington.

It is also clear that many ethnic Ukrainians would much prefer an independent Ukraine under the influence of the EU or possibly even as a member, rather than as a Russian satellite. This would mean a gradual but significant shift in political, legal and business culture that would take it far away from Putin's Slavic particularism as practiced in Russia and Belarus.

There seems no long-term solution to the endemic instability of Ukraine while the country is so clearly ethnically and politically divided, however. One option is return the Crimea to Russia, or perhaps install it as an independent republic in its own right. In the purely Ukrainian context this could be a price worth paying to release Moscow's brake on Ukrainian ties to the EU. But even within the Ukrainian context there are problems. For a start, such a move would place Russian troops on Ukrainian borders. It would also stimulate the Crimean Tartars and ethnic Ukrainians to start agitating in their turn; indeed, evidence of this has already been seen.

Beyond Ukraine, the precedent of allowing a part of the country to split off because it becomes unmanageable could set a whole host of hares running, not least for Putin himself who has lots of issues in the Caucasus of a similar kind. Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria and Nato in general would be quite distressed to see the Russians back in the Crimea in force, as would Georgia which is still smarting from Russian military intervention.

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Flying the flag: Russian troops entered the Crimea even as their political leaders denied their presence

Besides, this does not address the main challenge that Putin faces. This would, he knows, be his first major strategic reverse. A Ukraine on-track to join the EU, shorn of Crimea or not, would be an undoubted humiliation. Not only would it torpedo the whole strategy of maintaining a buffer between Russia and the West, it would also undermine his claim that liberal democracy was not suited to Slavic countries. In other words, Russians would see that there was a choice of political philosophies. So the propaganda machine has gone into overdrive. The sun of Sochi has been very quickly wiped out. Ukraine has been subject to an "armed coup" perpetrated by "Western-backed hooligans" who have overthrown a democratically-elected President. But things will leak into Russia through social media. President Yanukovych's estate, the size of Monaco and dripping with luxury, cannot simply be wished away. The extent of financial corruption by him and his family give the impression that this was a kleptocracy, not a democracy; claims that over $20bn of the gold reserves were embezzled, that $37bn of state loans "disappeared" and that $70bn was moved to offshore accounts in the past three years indicate that more is likely to come when the recovered documents are dried out and restored. These are already reported to show evidence of multi-million dollar corruption and mismanagement.

This does not mean that any ethnic Ukrainian president would not be corrupt too. But the sheer scale, and the fallout, might rein in any future excesses. The ball is now in the EU's court. It has stepped up and challenged Putin over Ukraine, and looks to have won this round. But it will need to work hard and fast to retain the prize before the country financially collapses and dissolves into political chaos and ethnic strife. Brussels cannot evade responsibility for its actions. This will be a true test of a unified EU foreign policy in action.

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