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The following European experts also participated in the Ukrainian portion of this project:

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### **Background: Why Ukraine?**

Numerous commentaries prior to and following the collapse of central authority in the Soviet Union stressed the likelihood of extensive inter-ethnic violence in Ukraine, which was considered poorly prepared for independence. In particular, the East-West divide separating the largely Ukrainian-speaking population of Western Ukraine and the Russian-speaking population of Eastern Ukraine, was perceived to pose a major threat to Ukraine's integrity. In all the scenarios emphasizing the potential for inter-ethnic violence in Crimea, an autonomous republic within Ukraine, was regarded as the "hot spot" where conflict was most likely to occur.

In retrospect these concerns were exaggerated, and did not take account of the specific circumstances in which large-scale ethnic conflicts are most likely to occur. However, at the same time many of Ukraine's politicians have been overly smug in portraying Ukraine as an oasis of inter-ethnic harmony, since the country faces a number of serious challenges related to its ethnic and regional diversity. These challenges have included, among others, formulating and implementing new language policies, aiding in the repatriation of the Crimean Tatars, dealing with great intolerance towards the Roma (gypsy) minority and refugees from Asia, and finding an appropriate balance between citizens' individual rights and the group rights of ethnic minorities as well as the titular ethnic group.

Such challenges are daunting even in the most favourable of settings, as continuing inter-ethnic tensions in liberal democratic states such as Canada and Belgium clearly demonstrate. Despite Ukraine's generally favourable record to date, it should also be noted that the growing consolidation of the Ukrainian state will, in some spheres, actually increase the potential for the growth of tensions over issues which can easily become politicized.