

Guest post: why is Akhmetov not combating separatism?

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By Taras Kuzio

After the fall of president Viktor Yanukovich, the Euromaidan leadership turned to Ukraine's eastern oligarchs to take charge of the Donbas region. Rinat Akhmetov, one of the world's 50 wealthiest people, was offered the governorship of Donetsk, now at the centre of [clashes between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian separatists](#).

Akhmetov turned the job down and it went instead to Serhiy Taruta, a fellow billionaire who recently [told the FT](#) the region's youth saw a "brighter future in integration with the EU" than in following Crimea into Russia's embrace.

Akhmetov, however, has preferred to bide his time and trade his support with Kiev and Moscow.

Ukraine after the Orange Revolution and Ukraine after the Euromaidan are very different places for Akhmetov. In 2005 he fled to Monaco to one of his many luxurious palaces in the EU and remained there until the government of Yulia Tymoshenko was removed in September of that year.

Today, he does not wish to flee to the EU because of potential difficulties he could face. Although he is not on Ukrainian or international wanted lists his offices in Switzerland have been raided by police investigating ties to Oleksandr Yanukovich, who is wanted.

In addition, the detention in Vienna at the request of the US of gas tycoon Dmitry Firtash, who was also not on wanted lists, must have sent a sharp signal to Akhmetov of what could await him if he enters the EU. [Charges brought by the US Department of Justice](#) could land Firtash up to 20 years in prison if he is deported to the US.

[Firtash and the influential gas lobby](#) have played better hands than Akhmetov in the Ukrainian game of poker. Firtash and the gas lobby invested in Vitaliy Klitschko and the party he leads, the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms, and persuaded him to drop his candidacy for president in favour of chocolate oligarch Petro Poroshenko. With the highest ratings, Poroshenko (and therefore the gas lobby) could win the pre-term presidential elections in June's second round, thereby securing high level support for Firtash's claim to be innocent of the DOJ charges.

Akhmetov, on the other hand, for the first time in his business career has no high-level political protection. The Party of Regions denounced Viktor Yanukovich, his long-term business and political partner, after he fled from Kiev and internal discipline is no longer its strong point.

The Party of Regions is backing former Kharkiv governor Mikhail Dobkin, who is on bail pending charges of backing separatism and has little support. Meanwhile, another six candidates have emerged from the Party of Regions, some reformist such as Serhiy Tihipko and others more controversial than Dobkin such as Oleh Tsaryov, who has offered to be leader of the eastern Ukrainian separatists and is met by protests wherever he campaigns.

The Party of Regions has shrunk to half its size in parliament and, outside, its members continue to leave in droves. Political pluralism will return to its eastern and southern regions in post-Yanukovich Ukraine and the Party of Regions will therefore not win first place plurality in this year's pre-term parliamentary elections – as it did in the past three elections.

Russia's annexation of the Crimea will be a blow to Party of Regions support as, together with the Donbas, Crimea was an important political base. Eighty-two out of 100 deputies in the Crimean parliament from the Party of Regions supported the peninsula's annexation.

Akhmetov is also understandably cautious about Timoshenko, who has been wooing him, hoping to receive support in eastern Ukraine. This high-risk gamble by Timoshenko could rebound badly among her hard-core voters, who love her anti-oligarch rhetoric, and among Euromaidan participants who believed they were fighting for a different Ukraine where Byzantine horse-trading would be a thing of the past.

A striking feature of the violent separatism and alleged Russian intervention in Donetsk is Akhmetov's passivity, except for an occasional statement and one feeble attempt to negotiate with separatists.

In neighbouring Dnipropetrovsk, the oligarch Igor Kolomoisky, a strong backer of Ukraine's Jewish minority and financier of the JN1 Jewish 24 hour news channel, has kept a lid on separatists and the region has remained quiet. Akhmetov, who employs hundreds of thousands of people in his Systems Capital Management empire, could have brought them out to support Ukrainian territorial integrity and in opposition to separatism, which has less than 10 per cent support in Ukraine's east and south with a high of only 18 per cent in the Donbas.

Oligarchs in Ukraine and Eurasia are loyal to themselves rather than being patriots of their state; nevertheless, it remains a mystery why Akhmetov has not followed Taruta and Kolomoisky in keeping a lid on separatism. Ukrainian oligarchs would surely prefer to live in a democratic Ukraine integrating into the EU than in either a Ukrainian separatist enclave such as Moldova's Transdnestr or annexed by Russia. It would seem Akhmetov has yet to make up his mind.

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