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Guest post: few options for Ukraine after latest defeats

Guest writer Feb 23 12:18 Comment



By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

Victory over Ukrainian forces at Debaltseve last week was the best present that Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, could have hoped for on the first anniversary of the Euromaidan – a victory won with the increasingly open involvement of Russian military forces.

As European leaders marched with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in Kiev, a terrorist attack on another march of dignity in Kharkiv killed two and wounded many more. Ukraine's security service foiled further bomb attacks in Kharkiv and Odessa.

Why did it happen?

Moscow – unlike Kiev, Brussels and Washington – has goals in the Donbas conflict. Ukraine signed up to the doomed Minsk I and II agreements and its call for UN peacekeepers, after months saying foreign troops were not needed, confirmed an absence of strategy.

Western leaders have made up their policies towards Russia as they go along, unwilling to adopt tougher economic and financial sanctions against the Russian ruling elite, let alone supply military equipment. Cutting Russia off from the Swift payments system, as Edward Lucas advocates, would severely incapacitate a regime whose kleptocratic elites are reliant on money laundering.

Putin's goals are to destabilise Ukraine and install a pro-Russian leader. Russia seeks a 19th century-style carve up of Europe into spheres of influence with Ukraine firmly inside Russia's.

Putin's proposal for a federalised Ukraine, with the Donbas holding a veto over domestic and foreign policies, is similar to the 'Kozak memorandum' proposed in 2003, under which the separatist Transnistria would have had a veto over Moldova. As the separatists now demand, pro-Russian satraps would no longer seek EU and Nato membership and would return Ukraine to a non-bloc status foreign policy similar to that under ousted president Viktor Yanukovich.

The separatists' goal is to expand their one-third control of the Donbas to its entirety, including the port of Mariupol. In violation of the Minsk II ceasefire, Russia is sending more men and military equipment into Ukraine and planning an assault on Mariupol.

A secondary goal would be to then to expand 'New Russia' (whose flag bizarrely resembles that of the American Confederacy) to Kharkiv, the intellectual capitol of eastern Ukraine. Russian-trained terrorists have long targeted the city, where 700 suspected terrorists have been detained resulting in 160 prosecutions.

Ukraine's initial defeat of the separatists in the summer was reversed by a Russian invasion. While the US continues to debate whether

to send military assistance, Russia massively invested in the separatists between Minsk I and II by establishing united political



This all took place while Russia was signed up to Minsk I and then Minsk II and proposing peace resolutions in the UN. Putin had the audacity to say last week during a state visit to Hungary: “I am deeply convinced that no matter what weapons you provide to Ukraine, it is always bad to supply arms to an armed conflict.”

What options does Ukraine have?

Firstly, to capitulate to Putin’s and the separatists goals. But if Moldova’s communist president Vladimir Voronin could turn down the Kozak memorandum we can be sure Poroshenko will do no less. Pro-Russian leaders such as Yanukovych who would agree to their demands are in exile in Russia and pro-Russian forces have disintegrated and are unpopular in Ukraine.

Secondly, continue in the Ukrainian manner to muddle through with no strategy, a policy that could end up leading to the first option. Poroshenko’s popularity is declining, amid dissatisfaction over his poor choice of prosecutor and failure to investigate the killings of Euromaidan protesters, coming on top of a severe economic and financial crisis, the debacles at Ilovaysk and Debaltseve and the poorly crafted Minsk agreements.

Thirdly, propose a referendum be held in local districts of the Donbas on the same day as local elections next month, with the choice of joining Russia or staying in Ukraine. In calling for Ukraine to withdraw from the Donbas, Alexander Motyl espouses a view commonly found in western Ukraine, where conscription quotas are the lowest filled in the country.

Fourthly, stop dodging reality and transform the declared Anti-Terrorist Operation into a state of emergency and state of war with Russia, withdrawing Ukrainian forces to defensible lines, mobilising hundreds of thousands of reservists and training those not called up for partisan warfare.

With the collapse of Minsk II the west has reached a 1938 déjà vu, when Britain sought “peace in our time” by sacrificing the Sudetenland. Crimea – not mentioned in Minsk I or II – and the Donbas are today’s equivalent.

As the Minsk II ceasefire collapses, UK defence secretary Michael Fallon has warned that Russia presents a “real and present danger” to the Baltic states. Better, then, not to repeat the mistakes of the past and for President Barack Obama to give Poroshenko the means to stop Putin before history repeats itself – again.

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