

A Ukraine on the Verge of Disaster Benefits No One

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In the past three months, the lines of contact between Ukraine and the forces in Donbass have seen an [escalation of considerable tension](#). Both the republics of [Lugansk](#) and [Donetsk](#) have suffered violent attacks at the hands of Kiev's military forces. Of course all these [violations](#) are in stark contrast to what was established in the Minsk II agreements, in particular as regards the use of certain weapons systems.

In addition to the military issues between Donbass and Ukraine, Kiev faces important internal struggle between oligarchs regarding economic issues. Symptomatic of this were the clashes in [Avdeevka](#), then the attempts to capture the [water filtration plant](#) in Donetsk, and finally the [blockade of coal transit](#) from Donbass to Ukraine. All these have further deepened divisions between the components of the Ukrainian state's power. The consequences of these events have led to greater instability in the country and decisive moves by the nationalist fringe alongside the Ukrainian SBU and other components of the military, who are the authors of the blockade of the railway lines between the Donbass and the rest of Ukraine. Intensifying the divisions within the country, the meeting between Tymoshenko and Trump has further increased tensions, with Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman defining [Timoshenko as the source of all problems](#), both economic as well as regarding corruption. Ukraine is politically divided, exacerbated by disputes between Poroshenko and Tymoshenko, and these divisions are being exploited by foreign actors like [Israel](#) and [Turkey](#), propping up the nationalist and banderist fringe within the National Guard battalion.



External pressure is clearly exerted indirectly on the Poroshenko administration in order to force it to keep the extreme factions of the nationalist battalions under control. For his part, Trump, by meeting with Tymoshenko, has sent a clear signal that in the case of excessive chaos in Kiev, the succession of power has already been decided. In the same way, the IMF exerts pressure on Kiev, [slowing down](#) the funding necessary for Ukraine to survive.

The danger that Western planners see is at the same time simple and delicate. On the one hand, there is a need to avoid a failure of the Ukrainian state, and nearly \$18 billion of IMF aid serves that purpose. On the other hand, the withholding of IMF funding is applied whenever there is a need to get something done by the government in Kiev. An example can be easily seen with the escalation in Avdeevka that indirectly led the IMF to reduce the overall aid package, with the justification being that corruption remains high in the country. The goal was actually to avoid a complete breakdown of the Minsk II agreements and put a halt to the Ukrainian operation on Avdeevka. Even in the meeting between Tymoshenko and Trump, the strong signal sent to Poroshenko was clear: stop the nationalists and their provocations or there will be consequences.

The subtle game that is being played in Ukraine sees many components involved, often with diverse objectives and methods. The nationalist component hardly responds to the oligarchs in Kiev and to the central authority. They are often the first to receive training and weapons from western colleagues serving in NATO. [American and British instructors](#) have for more than two years provided their services to this component in the country. The National Guard received the blessings of the neoconservative factions of American power, as confirmed by the presence of [Lindsey Graham and John McCain](#) in Ukraine a few months ago. In addition to support from the Atlantic networks and the local Ukrainian intelligence service (SBU), these battalions have Turkish support, which involves [Islamic extremists](#) in the National Guard. Moreover, they receive both political and economic support from infamous oligarch Igor Kolomoisky. Going straight to the problem, one can see that the National Guard, despite strong political and economic support is not able to deliver a decisive blow to the Donbass and inflict any significant damage, let alone organize an efficient offensive. The problem is therefore clear that the alliance between nationalists loyal to NATO/neocons, Turkish extremists, and Israeli oligarchs like Kolomoisky enable the nationalists to carry out provocations but not to organize a serious military offensive against well-fortified and organized positions of the Donbass republics. To attempt an offensive of this kind would at least need a real army that is well organized and motivated.

Ukraine is back to the usual problems that emerged in 2014 and now plague military planners in Kiev. The Ukrainian army, essential to achieving a real push towards Donbass, lacks the motivation needed to fight. These considerations were already clearly known three years ago at the beginning of the infamous anti-terrorist operation (ATO) Kiev carried out in the east of the country. Two years later, Donbass is much stronger. Thanks to a variety of military acquisitions from Russia, as well as targeted training and an important fortification of their defensive positions, Donbass now has a defensive capability that must be taken into account.



In this situation, there are multiple dangers that can unfold for Kiev. Poroshenko must give the nationalists and international networks connected to them the ability to operate virtually without restrictions in Ukraine. He was put in power exactly for that purpose. When this does not happen, as seen [in Avdeevka](#) and with the water-supply center in Donetsk, where National Guard battalions had to pull back, there are consequences. In his sense, the National Guard blockade on Donbass is, other than being part of the usual provocations between oligarchs, an explicit message aimed at Kiev, causing considerable economic damage. No wonder Poroshenko sent the army to remove the blockade, which, unsurprisingly, did not actually change the situation.

The blockade actually obliged Kiev to buy coal from Russia, which was ironically left the only supplier. This fact was exploited by the same nationalists who created the blockade in the first place, blasting the Kiev government for buying coal from their enemy. In this mess, the

Kiev government and Poroshenko should be aware of the consequences of excessive provocations against Donbass by the National Guard battalions. The ability of the Donbass to provide a firm response to any further aggression should be pondered by Kiev, even as tensions within Poroshenko's inner circle continue to rise. The Ukrainian president is forced to support the nationalists and their rhetoric against "terrorists in the east" to ward off new Maidan.

At the same time, he needs to by all means avoid a military response from the two separatist republics. Kiev is aware that it does not possess the capacity to conquer the Donbass in terms of personnel and equipment, and is also aware that if the conflict got out of hand, with the complete collapse of the Minsk II agreements, the DPR and LPR would have the capability to extend their boundaries decidedly to the south, setting their sights on the Ukrainian coastline along the Black Sea.

Realistically, this scenario would be a nightmare for all the actors opposing the Donbass, especially for NATO and Poroshenko. Mariupol and Odessa appear to be the likely targets of a hypothetical new advance of the Donbass should the Minsk II agreements collapse. The Russian Federation and Donbass have made it amply clear that any new aggression from Ukraine will be met with a firm response. While this would not involve a direct attack on Kiev, it would establish a larger buffer zone that could include Mariupol and maybe even Odessa. This posture intends to create the necessary awareness in Kiev, and even in NATO, that it is not in their interests for an all-out war to be waged against Donbass.



The consequences of these actions call directly into question the NATO strategy in the Black Sea. The ultimate purpose of NATO is not to save Ukraine from a non-existent Russian threat but rather to put continuous pressure on the Russian Federation in every possible way. The objective is not even to reconquer Donbass, [something that is also unfeasible for the military planners in Brussels](#), but the continuum of tension on Russia's borders, occupying the attention of Moscow and continuously creating hotbeds of tension on its borders. In this regard, the Ukrainian access to the Black Sea is fundamental for NATO. The continued presence of NATO ships in the Black Sea to carry out [joint exercises with Ukraine](#) violates the Treaty of [Montreux](#) and is done to exert pressure on Russia from the sea. To bypass the Montreux convention and have a semi-permanent presence, the United States intends to [donate](#) a couple of ships to the Ukraine Navy in order to change the flag of the vessels, thus ensuring NATO's legal permanent presence in the Black Sea without violating the Montreux Treaty. The port of Odessa is central in these calculations and it is of no particular surprise that in the event of a Novorossiia offensive following a Ukrainian attack, both Odessa and Mariupol would be difficult to defend for the Ukrainian army. [Already in 2014](#), both Mariupol and Odessa had been calculated as possible targets of a wider strategy to liberate the cities from Kiev's forces.

The bottom line is that the Kiev government is between two fires. On one side, the oligarchs battle each other, without regard for the life of Ukrainian citizens or the residents of Donbass, solely focused on enriching themselves. On the other side, the western components in Ukraine (known as neoconservatives) fan the flames of conflict with military trainers and equipment banned by the Minsk II agreements, providing them to the Azov battalion, the most extremist wing of the National Guard. At the same time, Germany, and especially Russia, is gravely concerned over a possibility of the Ukraine economy defaulting, and of what that could mean in terms a huge wave of migration towards both countries, a situation Berlin would struggle to digest after all the migration coming from the Middle East over the last two years.

A potential default of the Ukrainian economy, and resulting destruction of the country, overshadows any struggles between oligarchs, and even the battle against Donbass. Options for Putin, Trump and Merkel all seem to be on the table with economic ([nationalization of industries in the Donbass](#), slowdown in lending by the IMF), political (Trump meets Tymoshenko, a rival of Poroshenko) and military pressure ([strong Russian presence](#) behind the two separatist republics) applied in every way to prevent an all-out war in Ukraine.

The main danger is now clear to everyone involved – to Russia, the Donbass, NATO and Kiev. A new war between Donbass and Ukrainian would result in the defeat of Ukrainian forces, with consequences for NATO, since Donbass would hardly stop outside Mariupol and would instead proceed to Odessa. Kiev has a very weak capacity to mobilize motivated forces ready to sacrifice their lives for what are deeply corrupt oligarchs. This situation would cause an internal dilemma for NATO as was the case in 2014. Would NATO deploy its forces alongside those of Kiev to defend the ports in question, especially Odessa? If doubts where high three years ago, hardly anything has changed in recent years. NATO will not rally to the Kiev's side. And the reasons remain the same, namely the risk of a direct confrontation with Russian troops, although Trump's recent [actions in Syria](#) have raised much concern in Moscow in relation to the Ukrainian situation. A war against Donbass could easily lead to a wider conflict between superpowers, something impractical for even the most hyped warmongers on the Atlantic sphere. Realistically, Donbass troops, after repulsing Ukrainian aggression, would go on the offensive, and enjoying clear superiority in the region, thanks to Russia as well as to a higher level of motivation, would probably make their way all the way up to Odessa, securing the entire coastline.

The consequences of such a defeat would lead to the collapse of the central authority in Kiev, to an open war between oligarchical factions, to an end of loans from the International Monetary Fund, condemnation from European and American politicians, and to a definitive collapse of the Ukrainian economy. This would spell the end of business for Poroshenko and other business oligarchs, both in Kiev and in the West. Again, no one is interested in seeing such a scenario coming to fruition.



It is also important not to underestimate the partial unwillingness of Moscow to support an open war on the offensive by the Donbass army, especially given the political and economic consequences that the West would visit on Moscow.

The economic assistance that the Donbass would require from Moscow is another important consideration and something that the Russian Federation would prefer to avoid. It should, however, be stressed that in the unlikely event that Ukraine does not hold at bay its eagerness to wage war in Donbass, Moscow would openly side in favor of the Donbass, and the consequences for Ukraine and NATO would be disastrous, as we have seen. There would be enormous concern in such a scenario from Moscow, and the Russian Federation would take every step to avoid such a scenario, but if things got worse, Putin would be ready to support the advance of Novorossiia up to Odessa in order to secure once and for all the republics of Donetsk and Lugansk.

All the provocateurs in Ukraine should be aware that playing the nationalist card can be dangerous and can even result in a defeat that, when compared to 2014-2015, would be dramatically worse, condemning Ukraine to an economic, social and political crisis without precedent or a way out. It literally could be the beginning of the disintegration of Ukraine as we know it today.

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