

Donbass and the “Big Game”: Reformatting Ukraine is on the Agenda. “Russia will not Remain on the Sidelines”

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Latest [horrible ceasefire violations in Donbass](#) by the Kiev's regime are likely intended to demonstrate the “inefficiency” of the [OSCE mission](#) to its Western patrons and are evidence of Ukraine's attempts to circumvent the jurisdiction of the [Minsk truce](#) co-brokered by Russia, Germany, and France.

Indeed, Minsk-2 is very inconvenient for Poroshenko, because it documents for the first time the need for direct dialog between Kiev and the Donbass. And they need to discuss more than just war and peace, because in fact there are a whole range of issues that must be resolved politically, such as the format for local elections, as well as constitutional reform and economic recovery in Ukraine. Minsk-2 undermines the power structure in Ukraine, which after Maidan has been built around nationalist and military mobilization and the persecution of political opponents.

There's a good reason why President Poroshenko immediately tried to disavow the agreement as soon as he returned from Minsk. In March 2015 the Verkhovna Rada [passed an amendment](#) to the law on the special status of the districts controlled by Donetsk and Luhansk (in violation of the spirit of the Minsk agreement), rather than adopting a new law as Angela Merkel had asked Poroshenko to do. These actions, as well as others that undercut the foundations of the truce, are causing extreme irritation in Berlin and Paris.

It is already clear that Poroshenko's regime is incapable of negotiating. The two Minsk agreements – dating from Sept. 5 and Feb. 12 – would never have been reached had Kiev not suffered military defeats. As soon as Petro Poroshenko won the election on May 25, 2014, Russia and the EU leaders offered to open a dialog with the Donbass militia. At that time there had been no mass casualties or widespread public acrimony. It seemed that Poroshenko, who had been elected to office (albeit without the voters of the Donbass), was capable of listening to the urgings of the leaders in Europe and Russia and begin a peace process. At least his campaign platform offered some hope of that. However, pressure from US officials forced Poroshenko to embrace a military solution. On May 26, 2014, for the first time since WWII, Donetsk was subjected to an air raid, the Donetsk airport was bombed, civilians were killed, and a real war began.

By late August, Ukraine had suffered a crushing defeat on all fronts and in all directions, and Poroshenko, finding himself trapped in a hopeless situation in which the militia threatened to advance further west, had to hastily sign the [Minsk Protocol on Sept. 5](#), in which the

parties agreed to pull back from the zone of engagement. That offered the hope that a political process of reconciliation could begin. But instead Kiev took an extremely harsh stance: a de facto economic blockade of the Donbass began; banks closed; public institutions, schools, and hospitals shut down; the payment of pensions and salaries to state employees was suspended; and later – entry to the Donbass was limited to holders of residential passes, in essence creating an internal border. Unable to win on the battlefield, Kiev declared war on the people of the Donbass in order to deprive the militia of popular support. That culminated in yet another fiasco: Ukraine lost Debaltsevo and other territories.

Autonomy or Independence? That Depends on Kiev.



The most important step in the establishment of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics was the [election in November 2014](#). That election was not recognized by Kiev or the EU, but played a huge role in establishing a legitimate government in those republics.

In spite of Kiev's economic blockade and the constant threat of renewed hostilities, it resulted in an undeniable improvement in the humanitarian situation. Even as hostilities raged, behind the front lines peaceful civilian life continued, infrastructure was restored, doctors were able to save lives, children attended school, and many businesses reopened.

Regular payment of pensions and public subsidies has begun again, but in order to accomplish this, a new system of social support had to be built from scratch. Due to the lack of cash in hryvnia (the Ukrainian currency) a multicurrency system was introduced, and pensions are already being paid in rubles. Direct economic ties between companies in Donetsk and Russia have been revived. Taxes have also been collected from those businesses, and the republics now have actual budgets, and although they have not been formally approved due to the uncertainty of the revenue base, those budgets serve as guidelines for estimating bare-bones expenditures.

A clear and transparent system has been put together for distributing humanitarian aid. Humanitarian convoys are arriving from the Russian Ministry of Emergency Management, and community organizations are also doing their bit, including Donbass Fraternity Fund, Dr. Elizaveta Glinka's Fair Aid Foundation, and many others. Throughout the war some local charities in, such as Compassion (*Dobrota*), have continued their work in Donetsk. In every town, no matter how tiny, volunteers have been laboring selflessly.

The more Kiev drags its feet on any political resolution or recognition of special rights for the areas under the control of the governments in the republics, the worse its chances to maintain its current borders. Ukraine will never be stable until she agrees to change. If Ukraine continues to insist on the status quo and persists in pursuing a military solution to the conflict, she will continue to lose ground.

A range of emotions are being experienced in the republics. It is clear that neither the militia nor the majority of the population can envision any sort of future life with Kiev: too much blood has been spilled and Kiev has brought too much suffering to the people of the Donbass – in addition to bombings, humiliation, and the economic blockade.

Nevertheless, Ukraine still has the potential to devise a more nuanced policy than just their extremely nationalistic current plan. This was clearly evident during [the elections for the](#)

[Verkhovna Rada on Oct. 26, 2014](#). Opposition Bloc even won in Dnepropetrovsk (where nationalist patrols are stationed on every street corner and government leverage coupled with street gangs worked to thwart any opposition movement), not to mention the cities of Zaporozhye and Kharkov. Certainly not all the credit for that success was due to Opposition Bloc itself – which barely waged any sort of political campaign at all – but could rather be chalked up to the public, who voted against the government and against the war. The turnout in Odessa (39.5%), the lowest seen since the end of the Soviet Union, was virtually an act of popular sabotage against “the outsiders’ elections.”



The potential for protest is huge, because Ukraine has no desire to be the country that the nationalists have envisioned. Every day of peace means new and difficult questions for the Ukrainian government: the population sees the results of the “reforms,” the economy is languishing, social payments are shrinking, prices are rising, political repression is everywhere, political opponents are being murdered, and the bodies of soldiers who died in the Donbass are being shipped home to every district in the country.

The law prohibiting Soviet symbols and the ban on the memory of the Great Patriotic War, the glorification of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army – therein lies the path to the further destruction of their own country. And that’s not coming from Russia, but from the Ukrainian people. Most Ukrainians will not tolerate such a policy or such a government.

The problem lies in the immaturity of the Ukrainian political elite. For over 23 years of the country’s independence, that elite has been fixated on dividing and redividing the country’s resources, in the end always shifting the political blame onto outside factions: sometimes pointing the finger at Moscow, and currently – at the West. They have not yet learned how to be responsible for their own state. Now they follow the lead of the US, crippling their own country.

The Big Game

A lasting peace in the Donbass is achievable only if Europe and Russia can reach an agreement. It is impossible to imagine Poroshenko – or even less Prime Minister Yatsenyuk – behaving in a constructive manner, if Europe and Russia do not coerce them into working for peace.

With all the problems of the past year, it is clear that France and Germany trust Russia far more than their Ukrainian protégés. They can recognize the issues on which “the Russians cannot be trusted” – and the matters on which they can. But those are fixed, clearly defined questions – because Russia does not change her position minute by minute. But all bets are off when it comes to the politicians in Kiev. They might promise to lay down their arms or adopt a law on special status, and then completely flip-flop after a telephone call with Washington.

Of course Europe has phobias and fears of “Russian expansion,” but those are more common among the talking heads and the press, while the leaders and diplomats understand that “expansion” is the very essence of international politics. The European Union itself pursues an active policy of “partnership,” and in recent decades has also been expanding, while Russia is doing no more than attempting to safeguard her room to maneuver economically. Europeans understand that Russia would not have taken steps to

reunify with Crimea and support the Donbass if the West had not provoked the conflict. After many incidents of the most cynical violence aimed at seizing and retaining power over the last year, it is reasonable to assume that [the shootings on Maidan were the responsibility of those forces that took power in Ukraine in February 2014](#). All this is an example of very dirty politics. No matter how indignant the Europeans might be in public, they understand that Russia could not remain on the sidelines.

And that would not be because of any imaginary “imperial ambitions” or in order to merely seize territory. Russia’s most important and closest neighbor had entered into a period of disintegration and civil war after a coup d’etat. Forces had assumed power that did not shy away from overt violence – ideological, cultural, repressive, and military – against their own people. The problem was not Ukraine’s “European” path, but the bluff – the West was never planning to spend its resources on the economic development of a foreign country, much less help her integrate into European organizations. The result of Maidan could mean nothing but chaos in Ukraine.

And until this chaos is overcome, Russia will not remain on the sidelines.

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