

After Sevastopol, Donetsk?

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On March 21st, the Russian Federation formally welcomed a new entity in its midst, integrating the Crimean Autonomous Republic and detaching it from Ukraine. The ways in which this annexation took place laid bare the Russian leadership's expansive ambitions in the post-Soviet space and left it open to widespread criticism from most of the international community. On March 27th, a resolution proposed by Ukraine at the UN General Assembly condemning Russia's action was approved by 100 countries, leaving only 11 states to side with Russia with another 58 choosing to abstain and the rest being absent from the proceedings. This vote was seen in the West as proof of Russia's growing isolation, while Moscow chose to downplay this view, arguing that the votes in favour of the resolution were obtained by Western pressure: Russia's UN ambassador, Vitaly Churkin stated "We know that our Western partners used their routine practice when they addressed countries, say, African or Asian. They put it quite straight: 'We are providing economic aid to you. You enjoy these or those preferences in relations with us, so you must vote in favor of this resolution.'". He added: "we never use such methods"¹.

Leaving aside this last misrepresentation², Russia's actions since the start of the crisis in Crimea, at the end of February, has kicked off a new era of confrontation between East and West. This crisis is arguably the worst since the end of the Cold War and, if it does not mean a return to the bipolar confrontation of 1948-

1989, it is nonetheless worrying in that it deepens the chasm between Russia and its Western partners, with no positive outcome in sight. Russia appears to be diplomatically more isolated than before and its economy, already stagnant and fragile, has taken a hit. In March, the World Bank warned that Russia's economy could shrink 1.8% if the crisis escalated, down from a projected growth of 2.2% in December³. This is added to the massive capital outflow as foreign investors worry about the investment climate in an unpredictable and isolated Russia, as well as to the rising inflation and diving ruble, hurting the Russian economic, financial and banking sector⁴. And things might get even worse if new American and European sanctions are taken, this time targeting Russia's economy rather than only a few select individuals. These sanctions are still a ways off but could provide a real bite to the West's current bark if the crisis should persist.

Indeed, this could happen sooner rather than later as the situation shows no signs of a much-needed de-escalation. The latest developments in Ukraine are particularly worrying. The provisional government in Kiev is facing a perilous set of circumstances, with a chunk of its territory (albeit a poor and troubled one) gone, its economy in tatters, a hostile neighbour to the East and timid partners in the West. On top of this, it must now face serious challenges to its authority as new opposition movements pop up in the Eastern regions, particularly in Luhansk, Kharkiv and Donetsk. In Kharkiv, Ukraine's security services, the SBU, managed to evacuate a couple of government buildings seized by armed pro-Russian activists⁵ while in Donetsk, a few hundred pro-Russian separatists have occupied the main administration building and proclaimed a sovereign "People's Republic of Donetsk". They now hunker down in the building, strengthening their

¹ <http://rt.com/news/russia-us-churkin-relations-745/>

² Russia is notorious for exerting pressure to reach its foreign policy goals. This policy of hard and soft coercion is visible in the many instances in which it uses its energy resources to leverage political influence, by agreeing to sell gas at a premium rate to its allies while regularly raising its price tag of deliveries to less friendly neighbours, Ukraine being a case in point. Another instance of Russian pressure can be seen in the choice made by Armenia, in September 2013, to forgo signing an Association Agreement with the EU, preferring to join the Russian-led Eurasian Union in the near future. This decision was criticised in Armenia and in Europe, perceived to be the direct result of Russian threats to sell military equipment to Azerbaijan if Erevan chose to follow a European route (Armenia and Azerbaijan are in a state of latent war since 1992). <http://www.rferl.org/content/armenia-russia-customs-union-eu-analysis/25095948.html>

³ <http://rt.com/business/world-bank-russia-2014-369/>

⁴ <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/03/24/uk-russia-economy-idUKBRE-A2N13S20140324>

⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-lavrov-legitimize-nato-satellite-build-up/25329493.html>

barricades in case of an armed response by the security forces⁶. The standoff has been going on since Monday, April 7th, with no clear end in sight. The separatists and self-proclaimed “people’s representatives” plan to hold a referendum on month from now, on May 11th, in order to decide the region’s future, or rather, hoping to join Russia like their Crimean brethren did.

However, the situation in Donetsk is not a clear replica of the Crimean scenario and leaves some room for optimism. First, unlike in Crimea, there are no Russian boots on the ground in Donetsk (even without any official insignia). The separatists are determined but are not strong enough to pose an existential threat to Ukraine’s Eastern region. Moreover, the East’s geography does not lend itself to a quick land grab the way Crimea did. Indeed, the peninsula’s distinct shape meant that external military forces – i.e. Russia – could rapidly deploy and cut off contact between Crimea and the mainland so as to create a new reality on the ground. In comparison, Donetsk and the East do not lend themselves to such a strategy and, if a military incursion happens, it will be slower – and bloodier – than in Crimea. A second note of relative optimism is that, in Donetsk, the pro-Russian stance is not as clear-cut as it was in the Crimea. The East of Ukraine as a whole has a majority of Russian-speaking population, but fluency in a language does not necessarily translate to political support. In February 2014, a poll by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology found that only a third of the inhabitants of the Donetsk *oblast* wanted to be integrated in the Russian state. The same poll shows that in the East and the South, only 20-25% of the population want to unite with Russia. The majority (60-70%) would prefer to see Ukraine and Russia as independent but friendly neighbours⁷. In Crimea, the proportion of people wanting to join Russia in February 2014 was 40%, a far cry from the results of the March referendum, but a significant difference nonetheless. Events show that a focused (and one-sided) media campaign by the Russian media can rapidly change opinions but, for now, there is no evidence to suggest that the people of Donetsk and the East would really want to be annexed by their neighbour. Third and final thought, the Crimean success was achieved in large part by speed and surprise. In a few days, unidentified Russian troops were deployed throughout the peninsula, creating a *fait accompli* and leaving no chance for Kiev to react, barring a doomed military reaction. No such surprise is possible in Donetsk as the whole world is watching with bated breath the situation in Ukraine. In this context of heightened scrutiny, it would be hard to replicate the “Crimean gambit” in Donetsk.

Does this mean that things are looking up and the situation is bound to resolve itself peacefully? Not necessarily. If the crisis in Donetsk is not of the same magnitude as the one in Crimea, it still remains worrying for Ukraine and regional stability as a whole. First, because the government in Kiev seems incapable of

dealing with the situation. Authorities have promised amnesty to all protesters who surrendered, as well as acknowledging the need to grant more powers to the different regions of the country⁸. They have also threatened to use force if the stalemate persists⁹, with their ultimatum rapidly coming to an end¹⁰. But this threat rings hollow as Kiev is reluctant to make a move which might be deemed provocative by Moscow, whilst the loyalty of security forces in Donetsk is called in question. Indeed, up to now, the police have acted “more as observers than as actors”, sometimes openly displaying their pro-Russian tendencies¹¹. This lingering uncertainty is exacerbated by the second and main cause for worry: Russia’s (re)action. So far Moscow has not weighed in the situation in Donetsk but it remains a central preoccupation. The pro-Russian separatists are encouraged, at least indirectly, by Russian policy. Moscow organised the Crimean secession before annexing it, it has defended a forceful policy of intervention in any region where its “compatriots” (read: Russian speakers) are endangered and the law authorizing the use of force in the whole of Ukraine is still in effect¹². Furthermore, NATO warns of a massive military build-up near the Ukrainian border, which could be used to rapidly and decisively intervene in Ukraine if needed¹³. Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s Foreign Minister has stressed that there would be no more takeover of Ukrainian territory calling instead for a federalisation and neutralisation of Ukraine¹⁴. Is Russia’s show of force only a bargaining chip to push Kiev towards the federal solution? It seems to be, at least at first glance. Russian objectives regarding Ukraine are not to annex the whole country but to maintain it firmly under its influence. A deep federalisation, as it is proposed by Moscow, would serve that purpose, by weakening the central government and giving enough freedom to the regions to ensure their economic sovereignty and their choice of international partners. If the Eastern regions of Ukraine, richer and more industrialised than the western part, are permitted to join Russia’s orbit, it would amount to the creation of a constitutionally approved protectorate for Moscow. The use of force would then be unnecessary.

It is still too early to predict the end of the Ukrainian crisis for now, but it could go either way. The Ukrainian authorities could decide not to give in to Russian pressures and call Russia’s bluff by intervening in the East and forcefully evacuating the protesters. In order to do this, it would need to make sure of the police’s loyalty in those regions, bringing in troops from the western part if necessary. If Russia is indeed bluffing

8 <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-lavrov-legitimize-nato-satellite-build-up/25329493.html>

9 <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-turchynov-offers-amnesty/25328000.html>

10 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26953113>

11 <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-dontesk-dispatch-separatists/25325883.html>

12 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26400035>

13 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/10/ukraine-crisis-nato-images-idUSL6N0N24CC20140410>

14 <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/497930.html>

6 <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-dontesk-dispatch-separatists/25325883.html>

7 <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=236&page=1>

and does not react, this could be the beginning of the end of the crisis. Ukraine would still lose Crimea, but it would have stood up to Russia and would have – for now – escaped its orbit. On the other hand, if Russia is prepared to use military force to reach her strategic objectives, it could seize the opportunity of a crackdown in Donetsk to enter Ukrainian territory on the pretext of “defending its compatriots”. This would lead to a general war between Russia and Ukraine, which would be bloody and costly. It would also mean a real freeze in relations between Russia and the West, leading to more sanctions as well as political and economic isolation for Russia. Another possible scenario is that the authorities in Kiev give in. They accept a federal solution which would mean the end of a real Ukrainian sovereignty leaving in place a weak and neutralised country, easy prey for continued Russian influence. This outcome would probably leave the West feeling good about itself, having found a peaceful way out of the crisis. After a time, relations with Russia would restart on a more positive note and the problem in Ukraine will be forgotten by all. Vladimir Putin’s Russia would be the clear winner in that case and would no doubt feel emboldened to use force, or the threat of it, in future situations.

It is still too early to see which scenario will play out, the next few days and the situation in Donetsk will be crucial. If nothing is resolved before the date for the planned referendum, things will be probably heat up again. Another important juncture will be the Ukrainian presidential elections of May 25th. No one knows what will happen until then, but Russian reaction to the vote will probably be a useful indicator of the Kremlin’s further aims and posture. If it recognizes the elections as legitimate, it will mean it is ready for a peaceful de-escalation. However, it could also seize the opportunity to foment more trouble in the East, denouncing the so-called “neo-nazis” in Kiev as a pretext for further intervention. Springtime in Ukraine is bound to remain hot.

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