The Ukraine Debacle

By Anatol Lieven
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From public riots to the fall of Viktor Yanukovych’s government, from Maidan’s uproar to the escalation in the East: shaped by ages of forced relations with its most powerful neighbour, the recent Ukrainian history suddenly quickened its pace towards an uncertain evolution. Torn apart by ethnic strains and nationalism, the country dramatically became a focal point of the international agenda, the real epicentre of European, United States and Russian negotiations. Far from diplomatic meetings and foreign ministers talks, behind roadblocks and ruins, the battle between the new Ukrainian government and the pro-Russian separatists still enrages.

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During the last weeks, worldwide media proposed a wide coverage of the Ukrainian Crisis. Unfortunately, this constantly updated broadcast does not seem able to suggest a positive, concrete going forth; from the ruthless repression of the Maidan protests to Yanukovych’s escape, from the OSCE personnel’s kidnapping to the worsening of fighting in various Ukrainian cities and villages, the so much needed dialogue has been brutally hijacked by the force of arms and violence. Rational argument concerning Ukraine both in Russia and the West has been overwhelmed by a flood of hysteria, lies and self-deceptions: all the major players involved in this crisis fell back on propaganda and counter-propaganda, openly mendacious from Russia and equally lying on the Western side. This process was not only a governmental prerogative, being enthusiastically joined by large part of the media.

Moscow lied when describing the overthrow of the former President Yanukovych as a “neo-fascist coup”, rather than a popular uprising, widely backed in the country. On the other side of the world, Washington’s claims that Yanukovych “left his office” in Kiev were equally mendacious, since the manifestly abrupt circumstances of his government’s fall; at the same time, the United States were wrong in claiming that “far-right ultranationalist groups are not represented in the Rada”, the Ukrainian Parliament. The ultra-nationalist and savagely Russophobe Svoboda of Freedom Party owns 38 seats in the Parliament, also having four ministers in the government, including high-level charges like Minister of Justice and Deputy Prime Minister. Moreover, Svoboda’s founder Andriy Volodymyrovych Parubiy has been appointed Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, while his close ally Dmytro Yarosh, leader of the extremist, neo-fascist Right Sector, became his deputy [Note 1].

Svoboda’s real nature could not be misinterpreted. In a resolution of December 13th, 2012, the European Parliament recognized its dangerous nationalism, by clearly stating:

“MEPs voice concerns about the rising nationalistic sentiment in Ukraine which led to the election of the Svoboda Party to the Parliament of Ukraine. The EP recalls that racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic views go against the EU’s fundamental values and principles and it appeals to pro-democratic parties in the Ukrainian Parliament not to associate with, endorse or form coalitions with this party.”

Both the following clashes in Kiev, when several dozen pro-Russian demonstrators were burnt to death by Ukrainian nationalist demonstrators, as well as the sieges of various Eastern Ukrainian cities, efficiently underlined the clear and present dangers represented by such a powerful far-right presence in the country and inside its core institutions.

Such a violent nationalism on the field and inside the new government led to a legitimate fear of the Russian-speaking population.
Ukrainians for their own rights and safety, thus providing an excellent justification for Russian deployment in Crimea. While this annexation violated the international law, the European States and their allies were too premature in supporting the new Ukrainian government: they should have insisted for precise changes in its composition, as well as for firm guarantees of minority rights. This support was immediately provided by reaction to the Russian escalation, in the dramatic attempt to avoid an open war and preserve the democratic process in the area, as well as to keep Ukraine united; unfortunately, it was mistakenly perceived by the newly established Kiev’s rulers. Western allies can’t help this government to win with military force in the east. The rebel forces in the Donbas towns, the Russian-speaking industrial and mining region in the east, appear to be very well organized and with considerable local support; moreover, they are implicitly backed by 45,000 Russian troops that have been deployed to the Ukrainian border, whose partial withdraw has been announced only recently. It would take many months and, more probably, many years for regular Ukrainian forces to reach sufficient strength to retake the Donbas swiftly and relatively bloodlessly, or even worst, to defeat a Russian invasion of the east and south of the country.

Moves to raise armed Ukrainian nationalist volunteer forces and whatever large scale military attack by Kiev, already launched, should be strongly discouraged by the West. Such an intervention would risk repeating what has just happened in Odessa, where dozens of people were killed in street battles. And it would make Russian invasion a certainty.

It should be also considered that the West, despite all its demonstrations and blowhard posturing, will not fight for Ukraine. In these circumstances, this point should be strongly underlined in Kiev, carefully reminding the Georgian lesson of 2008: if Ukrainian forces will continue their assault on rebel strongholds in eastern Ukraine, then only three things can happen, separately or in sequence. First, they will be beaten back with the help of Russian weaponry, widely available to the rebels as showed during the last days: filo-Russians are backed by artillery, troop carriers and modern Russian anti-aircraft missile systems, perfectly able to match and down Kiev’s attack helicopters. Second, if Kiev forces will retake one town, Moscow won’t hesitate to reinforce the surrounding towns with lightly-disguised Russian special forces, making their capture almost impossible; third, if the Ukrainian forces resort to heavy weaponry to blast the pro-Russian forces from their positions, Russia will invade. The only question then will be where the Russian army will stop: whether Moscow would be content to hold the Donbas, as it previously held South Ossetia and Abkhazia, or would it go on to seize half of Ukraine.

**The Ukrainian war. Diplomatic failures and chances**

At the roots of the current Ukrainian crisis, quickly declining towards an open civil war, lay various failures and mutual misunderstandings in foreign policy, well before the escalation. Current relations between the European Union and Ukraine were mainly based on the European Neighborhood Policy, concerning free trade and political associations, signed in 2012; an association agreement, scheduled for the late November, 2013 was never properly ratified by the former President Viktor Yanukovych, due to the riots that lately forced him to resign and escape in February, 2014. It seems that, in summer 2012, various countries vetoed in Bruxelles the agreement with Yanukovych’s government, mainly because the low levels of democracy and human rights respect in his nation; the whole approach should be therefore considered as a mere, temporary attempt to block the Russian plan, aimed at the inclusion of Ukraine in the future Eurasian Union. It would have been necessary, of course, to be extremely serious when advancing such a strategy to a former Soviet republic; moreover, refusing to negotiate with Russia showed a clear lack of strategic forethought. Only Romano Prodi, the
former President of the European Commission between 1999 and 2004, suggested to negotiate a scale-down Ukrainian membership; but Sergej Viktorovic Lavrov, Russia’s Foreign Minister, has been completely ignored.

If the military solution seems to foresee its darkest evolution, more and more probable week after week, a constitutional solution of the crisis was supported by all sides. The Joint Geneva Statement on Ukraine of late April called for Ukrainians to agree a ceasefire, to disarm and take part in a national dialogue that would recognize regional interests. The problem with Geneva’s declaration is that it did not set out an outline of the constitutional settlement, which will have to be agreed in advance by the rebel militias in eastern Ukraine, to end their occupations. Given what has happened in Odessa, other reciprocal moves in the west and centre of Ukraine would have been needed, whether a dissolution of the Maidan camp of protestors in Kiev, or the withdrawal of radical nationalist parties with links to nationalist militias like Svoboda from key ministries. Ideally, a United Nations force to report on compliance by all sides would be also desirable.

It is extremely important to note that regional autonomy, somehow very similar to independence, has been declared in February by the government of the western region of Lviv, controlled by Ukrainian nationalists, when it still seemed that President Yanukovych would remain in power and take Ukraine into the Russian-dominated Eurasian Union. If Lviv could demand this as an insurance for its identity and interests, it is very hard to argue that Donetsk does not have the right to do the same. Nor is there any moral reason why the West cannot support federalization. The United States, Germany, Canada and half a dozen other western democracies are all federal states; the main Western critic to such an agreement, that would prevent Ukraine to join NATO, is unreal. The mere presence of filo-Russians in Ukraine already denied this possibility.

Unfortunately, reality and the long experience offered by such conflicts, shows that agreement on a new federal Constitution for the country as a whole must be reached first, and ratified by a national referendum. Before to agree such a referendum, both the armed rebel militias in eastern Ukraine and the camp of demonstrators on the Maidan in Kiev should be simultaneously disbanded, perhaps under the United Nation control: neither regional nor national democracy would be credible if governments have to submit for approval to unelected crowds.

It is no longer possible to deny that the Ukrainian crisis involves a serious threat from extreme nationalist groups as well as pro-Russian ones, and some of the extreme nationalists are sitting in the present national government in Kiev. On the other hand, the masses of unarmed local civilians who have blocked the path of Ukrainian troops in the Donbas show that while Russia has undoubtedly has armed local allies and strengthened them with some disguised Russian officers, the rebels also enjoy a very considerable measure of local public support. At the same time, the huge demonstrations in Kiev this winter showed that Yanukovych’s and Moscow’s hope of taking Ukraine into the Eurasian Union was impossible, thus destroying forever their project; events in the east and in Odessa make also clear that a Ukrainian state purely pro-Western and anti-Russian would be also out of the question, because many Ukrainians would literally give their lives to prevent both these outcomes.

Consequently, the goal of the West must be focused on a ceasefire, as well as to get all the opposing forces in Ukraine off the streets and back within a legitimate democratic process that is recognized by a majority of Ukrainians. And time is, unfortunately, short. As seen again and again in the Balkans, the Caucasus, in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and elsewhere in the 1990s, once fighting begins, previously possible solutions quickly become impossible. Until now, the
great majority of Ukrainians proved to be entirely content to live together in one country, so long as its particular identities and regional interests are not threatened. Despite much of the Western media, most of Russia’s supporters in eastern Ukraine are not separatists. They are deeply opposed to the current interim government in Kiev, but many of them continue to envision being a part of Ukraine in which they would have greater autonomy and recognition of regional rights and interests, rather than full independence.

In spite of the previous diplomatic failures, despite the worsening of the fights seems to preclude whatever negotiation, a widespread violence will surely lead the Ukrainian Crisis towards a full-scale civil war.

Notes

[Note 1] Ariel Danieli, From Washington to Moscow, everyone is lying about what is happening in Ukraine, in Haaretz, March 6th, 2014

Links

FEEM Lecture by Anatol Lieven, King’s College London: “The Ukraine Debacle”