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Scaring Russians With Ukraine

By Georgy Bovt

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It seems that no topic could be more important for Russia's political debate than the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. Russia's ruling elite and ordinary citizens watch events unfold there as though looking in a mirror. Contrary to the popular assertion that "Ukraine is not Russia," as former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma once titled his book, the Kremlin interprets the turmoil in Ukraine within a larger Russian context.

Many Russians refuse to accept Ukraine as an independent state. Despite all of the official talk coming out of Moscow that "the Ukrainian people must choose their own path," many Russians see the separation between the two countries as little more than a "temporary historical misunderstanding."

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Of course, Ukraine's history is marked by contradictions. As an independent state, Ukraine has only existed within its present borders for a short time. At various times, Ukraine was part of Lithuania and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and it was also under the authority of the Russian and Ottoman Empires. Today, the western part of Ukraine, which has long been part of Europe, has come into conflict with eastern Ukraine, which has long been part of the Russian Empire. These two regions differ in mentality, culture and language. Ukraine only became a republic of the Soviet Union on Dec. 20, 1922. Its territorial boundaries were only definitively set in 1954, when former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred the Crimean peninsula to Ukraine.

Internal political divisions coupled with its difficult economic situation are now pushing Ukraine to the brink of collapse. Throughout its entire post-Soviet history, Ukraine's economy has only grown worse. For example, Ukraine's gross domestic product in 2013 was only 84 percent of its size in 1992. Apart from the bankrupt state of Somalia, no other country in the world has a smaller economy now than it did 20 years ago.

Despite being a large country of 46 million people, Ukraine's economy is about the same as Romania, population 21 million, and the Czech Republic, population 10 million. In addition, two-thirds of Ukraine's exports come from just two cities in eastern Ukraine: Donetsk and Dnepropetrovsk. The rest of the country lives in conditions of economic collapse.

Russia has signed off on $15 billion in financial assistance to Kiev and already paid $5 billion of that sum. That money will at least postpone Ukraine's economic default, but it will not solve the systemic problems in the country's economy and failing government institutions.

Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych promised over the weekend to make political concessions to the opposition. But that move is probably more an indication that Yanukovych will soon have to leave office, which by no means guarantees that the overall political turmoil will subside.

Moscow lacks a long-term strategy for Ukraine aside from the Kremlin's never-ending nostalgia for rebuilding the Russian Empire — at least in terms of keeping Ukraine firmly in its orbit. In general, what type of Ukraine would be best for Russia: a united country or one divided in two, a Ukraine that is stable or constantly crippled by revolts?

In a sense, a Ukraine that has fallen victim to chaos with anarchists and other extremists taking over government buildings across the country is beneficial to the Kremlin because it can use it as a scare tactic. It can tell Russians that if the country never had a strong leader like President Vladimir Putin, Russia, too, would fall victim to its own anarchists and extremists. The Kremlin can say: "Ukraine's 'democracy' is destroying the country. Do you want Russia's 'democrats' to do the same in Russia?"

What's more, Russian leaders may exploit the unrest in Ukraine to justify passing additional laws that would crack down further on nongovernmental organizations, as well as on freedom of speech and assembly. Remember how Russia cracked down on its own opposition following the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004.

The Kremlin is concerned about the angry protesters in Kiev because there are too many things that the two countries share — above all, the high level of corruption and the huge gap between the wealthy and poor.

Meanwhile, Russia tries to shift responsibility for the Ukrainian conflict on to the West and its supposed "meddling." If Ukraine becomes dangerously destabilized, this distorted perception of reality could greatly complicate any future negotiations with the West concerning the country's fate. If Ukrainians are ultimately unable to cope with the deteriorating situation in their country, the global community will have to convene an international conference to decide the fate of Ukraine much like the "Geneva 2" conference held for Syria. Of course, the European Union, the U.S. and Russia would take the leading roles in such a conference.

When the crisis in Ukraine had just started, I said that the most effective resolution would be three-way talks between Russia, the EU and Ukraine. But Brussels was categorically opposed to such talks at that time and remains so today. Meanwhile, the threat of Ukraine's complete collapse grows daily.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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