

Illusion of Ukrainian Separatism

February 17, 2014

The  Moscow Times

It is now time for the Kremlin to invoke the first rule of policy-making: Never use your own propaganda as the underlying assumption for future policy. I am talking about Ukraine, of course.

For months, Russia's mainstream media has been portraying the protests in Ukraine as mob riots, an attempt by fascist militants and gay liberals — secretly funded by the West — to carry out a coup. Some commentators called Ukraine an "unviable" state facing imminent disintegration, arguing that in this scenario Russia should protect and even incorporate the Russian-speaking Eastern and Southern parts of Ukraine and reclaim the "Russian Crimea."

This misleading narrative is intended for domestic audiences to create a negative view of the Ukrainian anti-government protests as a Western conspiracy. But it could also work to justify a call for a more robust Russian intervention in Ukraine to "protect" ethnic Russians in the East and the South. It may even set up a political trap for the Kremlin, building domestic pressure to intervene.

To its credit, the Kremlin has not officially endorsed such incendiary talk. But it has not

exactly discouraged it either. Presidential advisor Sergei Glazyev publicly called for turning Ukraine into a loose federation with Western regions pursuing integration with the European Union and southeastern Ukraine integrating with the Russia-led Customs Union. He cited Denmark and Greenland as a good model for Ukraine.

If pursued, it would be a strategy based on self-delusion. There is no viable separatist movement in southern or eastern Ukraine, not even in the Crimea. Nor is there any public clamor for restoring a historic union with Russia. Strong public opinion in the South and East regions against the Euromaidan in Kiev and in favor of the Customs Union by no means translates into support for secession. Opinion polls in Donetsk and Lugansk regions in 2012 showed that only 2 percent support a full union with Russia.

There is no serious pro-Russian political force in Ukrainian politics. All officially pro-Russian parties have fizzled out and are completely marginalized. The Party of Regions is anything but pro-Russian. Its pro-Moscow frontmen have little influence on the government's decisions. Party of Region leaders who have started flirting with secession, like in Kharkiv and Crimea, are primarily seeking to keep their hold on their regions and squeeze out rivals from Kiev and Donetsk.

Ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians are not threatened with violence. There is little likelihood of violent clashes or civil war between western and eastern parts of Ukraine. The language differences have ceased to be an issue. Efforts at replaying the World War II conflict between Ukrainian nationalists and Soviet forces are comical theatrics.

Russian interference to encourage secession of parts of Ukraine would be condemned in the West and elsewhere. What's more, Russia would encounter instability and possibly armed resistance in the secessionist regions, injecting instability into Russia proper and incurring staggering costs.

A major confrontation with the West would ensue, with Russia isolated internationally. China would not be on Russia's side either. Western economic sanctions, asset freezes and visa restrictions would be likely, crippling Russia's economy. This is hardly a price worth paying for geopolitical glory.

Russia has legitimate interests in seeking to shape in its favor the outcome of the unfolding crisis in Ukraine, but encouraging the disintegration of the country and intervening to perpetuate it is not one of them. Letting Ukrainians sort this out themselves is the only option.

President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy so far has been anything but reckless. On Ukraine, it is time to show leadership based on reality, not propaganda.

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