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The High Cost of Ignoring Russia in Ukraine

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There is no question that to Russia, the revolutionary transition of power in Ukraine constitutes a major geopolitical defeat. All the talk about a non zero-sum nature of Ukrainian transformation in the interest of the "people of Ukraine" is little more than a smoke screen covering the West's ambition to have the final say in Kiev. To think otherwise is to pretend that international politics does not exist.

The West will
bear
responsibility
for Ukraine's
instability
for undermining
its ties to Russia.

The Kremlin is not naive and has been well aware of Washington and Brussels' bets, as revealed in recently leaked phone conversations of its top officials. Rather than trying to work out an acceptable deal with Moscow, the West worked closely with moderate and radical nationalists in Kiev by encouraging their tough stance on ousted President Viktor Yanukovych.

It remains to be seen whether the West will manage to soften the geopolitical blow to Russia by engaging it in a joint stabilization of Ukraine. Several things will be watched closely by the Kremlin:

* the composition of Ukraine's government, especially the share of moderates and representatives of eastern regions in it

* the new government's intentions regarding membership of the European Union

* Russia's fleet in the Black Sea

* the rights of Russian speakers

* the position of Russian businesses in Ukraine

On all these issues, Western leaders have the option of either being sensitive to Russia's concerns or ignoring them by working with nationalists in Kiev.

So far, the U.S. and the EU indicated a desire to include Russia in their efforts to assist Ukraine in its post-revolutionary recovery. But signals coming from Kiev — and the West's inaction to those signals — are not encouraging. The signals include an intent by Ukraine's new leaders to ban several political parties and media deemed pro-Russian and biased, to introduce lustrations, to restrict the rights of ethnic Russians and to squeeze Russian businesses. Ukraine's new leadership also is insisting on gaining membership of the EU, apparently at the expense of the country's ties with Russia and the Customs Union.

In the meantime, Ukraine's revolutionary leaders seem to hope for the Kremlin's continued economic assistance and lowered prices for gas deliveries. For a long time, Ukraine was able to take advantage of Russia's geopolitical vulnerability by extracting economic concessions from it. Although President Vladimir Putin could barely hide his dislike of Yanukovych, he went out of his way to rescue the Ukrainian leader in December by giving him a major discount on energy prices and pledging $15 billion in aid. In the meantime, Yanukovych was never pro-Russian and had announced his plans to continue to build relations with the EU. He was merely wagging the dog, as several other post-Soviet countries have learned to do. In other words, as some Russian observers like to stress, Ukrainians wanted Moscow to finance Kiev's entry to the EU and break with the Customs Union.

That is not likely to work this time. The Kremlin is on alert and will employ the full range of levers available to prevent its further geopolitical humiliation. These levers may include cutting all economic assistance, blocking access for Ukrainian goods at Russian customs, introducing a visa regime, opening legal claims on Crimea, and encouraging separatism in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine. The military option has been excluded, but not in a case of major military provocations against ethnic Russians and Russian military bases.

The consequences of any sanctions would be extremely severe for Ukraine. The reputation of the West as the geopolitical backer of the new Kiev leadership would also suffer a tremendous blow. No package of Western economic assistance would be able to compensate for all the problems that the economically and politically bankrupt country is having. Besides, the promised involvement of the IMF is likely to create new problems. Its approach has been rightly compared to surgery without anesthesia, something that Ukrainian patients are the least likely to survive.

A new series of revolts and violence would follow. Every time that Russia applies economic pressure, Ukrainians will blame their own government, just as they have done before. They again will turn on their own leaders, and the West by association, as they did by voting pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko out of office and electing Yanukovych in 2010.

Both Russia and the West are responsible for the highly dysfunctional country that Ukraine has become because they pushed it to choose between one side or the other, thereby depriving it of a choice to remain a moderate, neutral territory between two large powers.

By further undermining Ukraine's deep connection to Russia, Western countries will bear the sole responsibility for future instability in Ukraine.

Now is the time for the West to reach out to the Kremlin and form a comprehensive arrangement under which the two parties will be joint economic donors and joint guarantors of Ukraine's stability and territorial integrity.

Short of such an effort, violence and vengefulness will soon return to Ukraine. As we know from the experiences of previous color revolutions and the Arab Spring, post-revolutionary hangovers are extremely painful.

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

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