

Putin's Federalization Card in Ukraine

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Not that long ago, the idea of federalizing Ukraine was interesting only to a handful of obscure scholars, but it has now suddenly taken center stage in the political debate. Moscow is demanding that Kiev adopt a new constitution that provides for a decentralized model of government to regulate relations between the regions and capital.

Most Ukrainian politicians strongly oppose this idea. Meanwhile, Washington does not reject the possibility of federalization but insists that Ukrainians must make that decision for themselves.

Introducing federalization in a highly unstable country that is on the brink of economic collapse could intensify the forces that are already pulling the country apart.

Even if a pro-Russian president came to power in Kiev, it is now highly unlikely that he could form a pro-Russian cabinet. Moscow's strategy is therefore to weaken Ukraine's government institutions as much as possible. Toward that end, the Kremlin wants to establish governing bodies that are autonomous in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Lugansk, Odessa, Dnipropetrovsk and other eastern regions of the country. The hope is that those regional administrations would then align themselves more with Moscow than with Kiev, making it possible to preserve their economic and cultural ties with Russia, along with their important links to Russia's defense industry.

Federalizing Ukraine would amount to a radical decentralization of power currently concentrated in Kiev. It would mean electing governors rather than appointing them from Kiev, permitting each region to retain the taxes their citizens pay, independent policies concerning the Russian and Ukrainian languages and greater powers for regional authorities.

If Russian cannot hold all of Ukraine within its sphere of influence, it can at least try to maintain its influence in the eastern regions loyal to Moscow.

Moscow justifies its demand for federalization by arguing that in the 20 years it has existed as an independent and unitary state, Ukraine has failed to consolidate and effectively rule its western, eastern, southern and central regions. Russia also says Ukraine lacks a common identity or a common historical narrative. Many people in southern and eastern Ukraine are unhappy with the government's attitude toward the Russian language and feel it should receive official status, citing the official multiple-language policies of Switzerland and Belgium.

In addition, Moscow argues that the current system of appointing governors from Kiev is extremely unpopular. Federalism would make it possible to resolve that problem because it takes each region's particular identity into account and enables them to coexist within the framework of a single country — just like other complex, multicultural federations of the world, from Canada to India.

According to Moscow, the adoption of a new constitution based on federalization will enable Ukraine to establish itself as a neutral state and to strengthen and guarantee the rights of minorities — especially the country's large Russian minority. Moscow contends that the Ukrainian people should hold a referendum to decide these questions.

In essence, Moscow is really calling for a confederation, which is an even looser form of statehood. Under such an arrangement, the regions would not only gain broad authority over tax, finance, economic, cultural and language-related questions, but would even have the right to determine their economic relations with other countries and, to some extent, formulate their own foreign policies. It is no coincidence that some politicians in eastern and southern Ukraine are already talking about the possibility of individual Ukrainian regions joining the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Community. They might begin suggesting that a new constitution grant regions veto power on basic questions concerning Ukraine's development and foreign policy stance.

No influential Ukrainian political figures support the idea of federalization, although it has gained backing from Viktor Medvedchuk, who previously headed the administration of former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. On the whole, Kiev is bitterly opposed to Moscow's

initiative.

During a meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrei Deshchytsia said it was inadmissible to federalize Ukraine and to make Russian an official state language. What's more, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry referred to the Moscow initiative as an attempt to "divide and destroy Ukrainian statehood." It urged the Kremlin to focus on federalizing Russia and to stop meddling in Ukraine's internal affairs.

Even the pro-Moscow Party of Regions and its presidential candidate, Mikhail Dobkin, have dropped their slogan calling for federalization. At the same time, however, they are willing to grant limited fiscal autonomy to the regions, a move that would drastically reduce Ukraine's federal budget.

The presidential frontrunners Petro Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko categorically reject federalization, but they acknowledge the need for greater decentralization.

The greatest threat to Ukraine is if the southern and eastern parts of the country decide to boycott the presidential election on May 25 and the subsequent parliamentary elections. If that happens, it will significantly undermine the legitimacy of the newly elected authorities and make it impossible for them to govern the entire country. A timely decision on federalization might motivate the south and east to de facto legitimize Kiev by participating in the upcoming elections.

But introducing federalization in Ukraine, a highly unstable country that is on the brink of economic collapse, could intensify the forces that are already pulling the country apart. If the disintegration continues, this would mean the authorities in Kiev would become nominal leaders only and have little authority or power to govern the country.

Federalization can help preserve the unity of the country only if there is a strong center, a shared desire to live together and a common vision for the future. Otherwise, federalization will only accelerate Ukraine's disintegration.

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