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Treat Russia as a Global Power

By Andrei Tsygankov

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The tragic developments in Odessa push Ukraine further in the direction of civil war. Whoever is responsible for the death of anti-Maidan activists, the result will exacerbate the conflict by giving ammunition to both sides of it. Secessionists will blame Ukrainian "fascists" for the extreme violence, whereas Kiev's supporters will refuse to take responsibility.

In the larger context, the military conflict in southern and eastern Ukraine is part of an intense international competition for power and influence in the country. The Geneva agreement was dead on arrival not just because Ukrainian or pro-Russian militants refused to surrender illegally seized weapons. The agreement was dead because Western governments and Russia failed to commit to demilitarization and the reconstruction of Ukraine. Not surprisingly, the U.S., the European Union and Kiev were quick to blame Russia for not making separatists disarm, while the Kremlin pointed to Kiev's unwillingness to assert control over irregular Ukrainian military units such as Right Sector.

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While both the West and Russia failed to discourage illegal military activities, they also provided support for violence rather than negotiations on the ground. Western governments preferred to overlook the rise of the radical right in Ukraine and Kiev's complacency or inability to restrain it. The West seems to hope that the problem will be solved on its own once popular elections are held.

Meanwhile, the U.S. is providing advice and intelligence to Kiev in its efforts to gain control over the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. The fact that the CIA director traveled to Kiev a few weeks ago may be only the tip of the iceberg of the coming U.S. assistance for Ukraine's "anti-terrorist" operations in its rebellious regions. These activities have already been supported by official statements from Washington and Brussels about the "legitimacy" of Kiev's actions, which are supposedly aimed at restoring the country's territorial integrity.

Russia is also not discouraging illegal military activities in Ukraine. Many of the pro-Russian mercenaries active in the separatist regions of Ukraine have come from Russia and other parts of Eurasia and are exploited by various political forces including the overthrown President Viktor Yanukovych, the power-hungry Donbass oligarchs and some members of Russia's political class. Evidence of the Kremlin's direct involvement in eastern and southern Ukraine is not conclusive, but Moscow will likely to be using those mercenaries for its own purposes — mainly, to coerce Kiev into negotiating with the separatists about some form of federalization. If Ukraine is moving toward a Syria-like radicalization, the Kremlin will likely provide significant military assistance to its proxies to preserve what it views as a balance of power.

Western countries will then feel compelled to respond by increasing their level of military assistance to Kiev. There is already powerful pressure in Brussels and among Republicans in Washington to provide advanced "defensive" weapons for Ukraine in its fight against what it believes to be Russia's extensive intervention in Ukraine. If pro-Russian militants seize more cities in Ukraine, Kiev will be inclined to launch a "humanitarian intervention," perhaps including airstrikes, to try to quell the rebellion.

This is the inescapable logic of a great power rivalry. After the Cold War, the U.S. forced its way in Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya, while Russia was unable or unwilling to push back. Now the game is different because Russia feels it has had enough of being pushed around. The Kremlin is no longer willing to accept the U.S. and the EU-favored outcomes. As Sergei Karaganov, honorary chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, wrote in a April 24 comment in Rossiiskaya Gazeta, Russia wants to renegotiate the end of the Cold War by concluding an international framework that treats it as an equal power, not a defeated one.

The tragedy for Ukraine is that it has moved to the epicenter of this international rivalry and is becoming a local front of a global power conflict. Any genuine solutions to Ukraine's problems will therefore have to be grounded in a search for a new balance of power in the region and beyond. A new international conference on European security may be a good place to start discussing this system. It is time to organize this conference before the civil war

in Ukraine spreads any further and before the great powers spoil all the constructive results of their interaction after the Cold War.

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

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