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Why Russia Will Not Meddle in Eastern Ukraine

By Vasily Kashin

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For the time being, Russian leaders have decided not to stage an overt military intervention in southern and eastern Ukraine. If the Russian military had been involved at all in the region, it was minimal. Judging from the fighting in recent days, it is clear that the Russian-speaking insurgents in the Donbass region have only a small core of people with serious combat training. Russian nationalists play an important role in that core group, but they still hold ambiguous attitudes toward Russia itself.

Most likely, separatist leader Igor Strelkov, who is based in Slovyansk, is acting on his own. That is not an unusual character type among former Russian members of the siloviki. In fact, retired Main Intelligence Directorate Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov, who is serving an eight-year prison sentence for plotting a mutiny against Russia, fits this character profile. Such people often try to place themselves at the center of tumultuous events and aspire to be leaders of rebellious movements.

In eastern and southern Ukraine, there is no evidence of the highly trained and well-equipped

"polite green men," who were seen during in Crimea in early and mid-March before the referendum was held there. The small core group of separatists in eastern and southern Ukraine is only equipped primitively and shows no clear signs that its members come from Russia.

It is likely that the insurgents seized the man-portable air-defense systems, or MANPADS, that they used on the first day of fighting during their disarmament of a division of the 25th brigade of the Ukrainian Navy. Apart from the few MANPADS, however, the insurgents are poorly trained and equipped, often carrying only hunting rifles and heavily outdated guns.

At most, the Russian Special Forces and FSB are probably monitoring the situation in southern and eastern Ukraine and possibly maintaining channels of communication with individual rebel leaders. Without this support, the poorly armed and trained Ukrainian troops would surely have faced much heavier losses when entering population centers. As proof, just recall what happened to the Russian Army during the first Chechen war in the mid-1990s.

Russia intends to closely monitor how much pressure Kiev applies to the separatist regions of Ukraine and likely limit itself to diplomatic demarches and lending propaganda support to the insurgents.

There are two obvious reasons for this. First, Moscow fears the large-scale economic sanctions that the U.S. and Germany have made clear they will impose in the event of a Russian military intervention in Ukraine. Second, Moscow has no desire to risk its economy over a large, economically distressed territory dominated by Ukrainians with ambivalent feelings toward Moscow.

It now seems that the Ukrainian government — despite its poor organization, low morale and lack of competency — is slowly tightening its encirclement of the insurgents, suffering setbacks and losses as it proceeds. It seems that the authorities in Kiev badly want to establish control over the rebellious territories in time to hold the presidential election on May 25, thereby giving it a semblance of legitimacy.

But it would be wrong to conclude that this indicates an imminent resolution to the crisis or an end to the confrontation between Russia and the West. Local residents will likely respond with anger to any military operation on their territories, and the tragedy in Odessa only reinforced those feelings. The Ukrainian state is standing on a powerful time bomb that will continue to threaten it for generations to come.

The prospects for Ukrainian state sovereignty were doubtful even before the current crisis. Following the ouster of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine was saddled with all of the problems usually associated with revolution — economic collapse, deep societal divisions, chaos and the loss of territory — without enjoying the benefit of at least installing a new leadership. All of the candidates for president and other key posts — including oligarch Petro Poroshenko and former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko — have long histories in Ukrainian politics. At various times in their political careers, they were linked to corruption, which means there is little hope their continued involvement would lead to significant improvements to the government or the economy.

There is no potential leader capable of accomplishing for Ukraine what former Georgian

President Mikheil Saakashvili did for Georgia. What is more, Saakashvili carried out his successful, although painful, reforms against the backdrop of the strong economic recovery that began when Eduard Shevardnadze was president. Ukraine is doomed to a protracted political crisis marked by an increasingly radical conflict over nationality, language and religion.

Russia, the European Union and the U.S. will likely become entangled in every new stage of the Ukrainian upheaval. Given the respective leaders' mutual distrust and their inability to compromise, the confrontation between them will only continue. In addition, Moscow's annexation of Crimea undermined U.S. authority so much that Washington now feels compelled to punish Russia and turn it into an international pariah. The West will impose both direct and indirect sanctions against Russia in stages and over a period of years. Although they will also hurt U.S. and European economies, they are in a better position to absorb the consequences.

Although Russia has not intervened militarily in eastern and southern Ukraine, it has not removed the threat of further sanctions. The Kremlin has merely bought a little time to prepare for the sanctions' impact by shifting economic, scientific, technical and other ties to Asia, trying to find substitutes for Western imports and taking measures to stabilize the financial sector.

Toward that goal, we can expect to see television images in the coming weeks showing "outsiders" in eastern Ukraine attacking and killing pro-Russian forces and civilians with the implication that U. S.☒President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel approve these measures. These images will leave an indelible mark on Russian public opinion and shape the country's political future for decades to come.

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