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Support for Thugs Can Only Hurt Moscow

By Vladimir Frolov

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Pro-Russian separatists stand guard outside the house of Rinat Akhmetov in the eastern city of Donetsk on May 25.

The Kremlin's support for armed separatists in eastern Ukraine may come back to haunt it as the chaos fuels terrorism fears and strengthens Ukraine against a pro-Russian satellite state.

Security officials are increasingly worried about instability being exported to Russia from eastern Ukraine. Regional authorities in Rostov and Belgorod are aghast at the prospect of heavily armed gangs roaming the land and wreaking havoc on the Russian side of the border.

Counterterrorism intelligence agencies in particular are worried over the possibility of another Dagestan, albeit with Russian nationalist militants infiltrating fighters and weapons into the Stavropol region, where a shooting war between ethnic Russians and Muslim Dagestanis and Chechens could erupt at any moment. They also fear that

an Islamist insurgency may break out in Crimea, since the preconditions are already in place.

The Federal Security Service is further unnerved by the proliferation of heavy weapons in the regions, and the spread of portable surface-to-air missiles and anti-tank missiles is of particular concern.

Most importantly, the strategy is failing to secure Moscow's primary political objective — a Bosnia-type federal structure in Ukraine with a pro-Russian statelet in the east. Armed gangs have destroyed the lure of accession to Russia and consolidated public support for the unified Ukrainian state throughout the Southeast.

Although some still hope to use the unrest in Donbass as leverage in future bargaining with the elected Ukrainian president, others warn that it could lead to new Western economic sanctions. In any case, it will not get Moscow veto power over Kiev's foreign and security policy, although there will be a meaningful devolution of authority to the regions, including a special status for the Russian language.

Moscow will have less political influence in Ukraine as pro-Russian forces are now marginalized. The Party of Regions and the Communist Party are effectively dead and may fail to get into the new Ukrainian parliament. Plans to launch a new pro-Russian party in the east that could have a lock on Ukrainian politics, vetoing accession to the European Union or NATO, have foundered so far.

Political strategists are worried that the state-controlled media's overwhelming support for the "warlords of Donbass" may eventually hurt Putin's street credibility as a protector of Russians in foreign lands. The Kremlin distancing itself from the pro-Russian separatists and withdrawing military units from the Ukrainian border could spark the militants' rapid capture or destruction by Ukrainian forces, angering hard-core Russian nationalists and causing them to break with the new pro-Putin majority.

Still, this distancing may be necessary. Russia's diplomats are not exactly thrilled with negotiating on behalf of a few unsavory characters and soldiers of fortune. They worry that support for warlordism in eastern Ukraine undermines Russia's arguments for the"legitimacy of self-determination in Crimea. It also makes any future discussion with Kiev about the benefits of the "Eurasian integration" untenable.

Indeed, It is hard to see why Putin, a stickler for order and stability, has responded to Ukraine's revolution by promoting armed chaos and Somali-type warlordism. It seems to be an odd instrument of influence and shows that revolutions and street power are bad for your health.

The risk of a serious blowback into Russia is forcing Moscow to rethink the wisdom of continued support for the proxies in Donbass. The precedents of armed men storming government buildings and holding bogus referenda on independence are too uncomfortable for the Kremlin to keep promoting for long. It is time to change the game.

Vladimir Frolov is president of LEFF Group, a government relations and PR company.

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