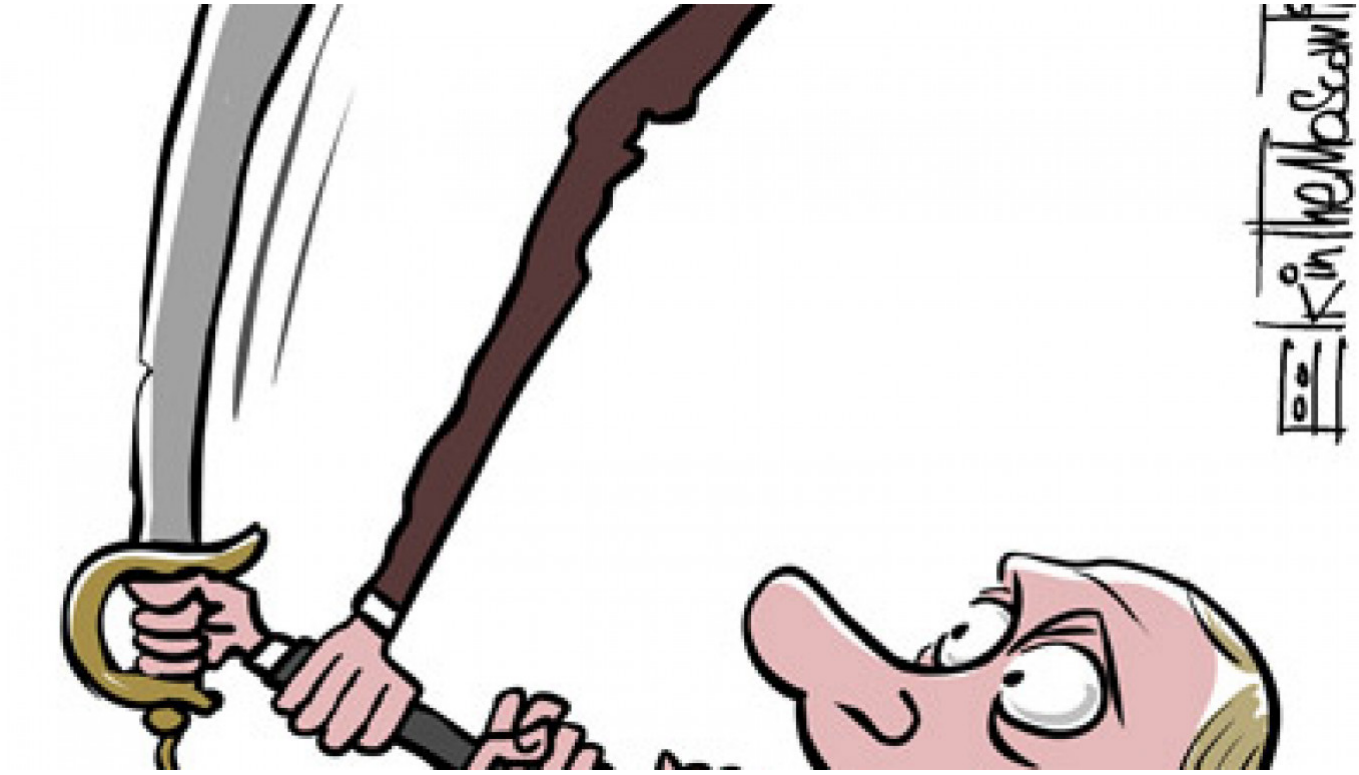
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Putin's Saber-Rattling Goes Quiet on Ukraine

By Georgy Bovt

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Ultra-patriotic Russian politicians are already asking: "Hasn't Moscow betrayed the militias of Donetsk, Slovyansk and Luhansk?" Indeed, many people are confused by the contrast between Russia's actions in Crimea and its almost total inaction — at least on an official level — in eastern and southern Ukraine.

The entire Crimean operation concluded without gunshots or bloodshed. But in the east and south of Ukraine, rivers of blood are flowing, civilians are dying, chilling footage of the carnage circulates on social networks and, unfortunately, residential areas have come under shellfire. The first refugees from the war zone have already crossed into Russia.

Putin has dropped the ultra-patriotic hyperbole that justified Crimea's annexation when speaking about eastern

Ukraine, but Russian are unlikely to call him on his inconsistency, writes columnist Georgy Bovt.

What is a patriot to think when, after watching Donetsk separatist leader Igor Strelkov and his compatriots hold the superior forces of the so-called "Kiev junta" at bay, he sees Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands with French President Francois Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and even that "agent of the U.S. State Department," Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko? How is that possible? Why isn't Putin sending in troops to defend our Russian brothers? Could Putin really fear Western sanctions?

Let's try to understand the situation without hysterics.

First, although Putin made the decision not to send troops into Ukraine some time ago, he may still have seriously considered that option. What's more, he might yet give that order — and not only because some members of other ruling elite favor it, but also because the situation in Ukraine might yet produce more surprises. There is no advantage to sending in the army now. Better to wait.

My guess is that Moscow leaders are coldly calculating the equation in Ukraine's east and south. For now, the separatists' weak political organization and low level of popular support, in combination with the tenacious Ukrainian army, may hold off direct Russian intervention.

Despite gaining reinforcements and weapons from "out of nowhere," the separatists have only limited fighting capabilities. They are only able to withstand the Ukrainian army through guerilla warfare. But that is their role. Both the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk, or DNR, and the People's Republic of Luhansk, or LNR, never managed to create a full-fledged and official governing structure paralleling the one that already exists and that is capable of attracting at least some members of Russia's bureaucratic elite — and, even more importantly, siloviki — over to their side.

The pro-Russian militias have no control over large parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Although the local security forces can be induced to disarm through violence, on the whole they do not want to join the ranks of the armed DNR and LNR defenders.

In fact, most of the local population does not support the DNR and LNR leaders. The mood on the street is by no means like that in Crimea, and Moscow was apparently unimpressed by the results of the hastily arranged referendums staged in the two regions.

At the same time, it would have been impossible to provoke an uprising "from scratch" in Ukraine's south and east: Putin's desire to see it happen was not enough to make it a reality.

Many eastern Ukrainians truly distrust Kiev's intentions, and to claim otherwise is the same as arguing that Maidan protests were purely the result of a U.S. State Department conspiracy and not a spontaneous uprising by the people.

Russian leaders are also likely to be discouraged from direct intervention by the strength the Ukrainian army has shown in fighting the separatists. If Russian troops enter Ukrainian territory, Ukrainian forces will find even greater strength to resist. If Russia wants to conduct successful "peacekeeping" operations in Ukraine, it would have to deploy at least 100,000 troops to that front —approximately the same number that fought in Afghanistan. And they should prepare for the distinct possibility that their trek across the Ukrainian steppe would be no easy stroll.

The Kremlin no doubt wants the militias in Ukraine's south and east to hold out as long as possible in order to strengthen Moscow's negotiating position and coerce Washington, and especially Kiev, to agree to compromise.

At the very least, Moscow wants to ensure that Ukraine has non-aligned status and that the eastern and southern regions receive sufficiently broad autonomy to establish their own economic ties with Russia.

In any other country, however, this unprincipled political scheming would be a leader's downfall. A leader who climbed to the pinnacle of popularity with a stunt like annexing Crimea and then suddenly abandoned ultra-patriotic hyperbole would face the danger of being overthrown by the very "ultra-patriots" whose cause he had recently championed.

According to their logic, it is nothing short of criminal to not intervene in eastern Ukraine. They expect Putin to press his case to its logical conclusion, even if it ends in nuclear war. This is no joke — I am certain that Russia's ruling elite includes advocates of such a policy. This is because the "loss" of Ukraine is an existential threat to Russia and the Kremlin will brook no alternatives or compromises in this regard.

The Russian political system is unique in that Putin's "Teflon effect" continues to work even now. Despite his contradictory tactics, Russia's ultra-patriots will not rise up en masse to protest. No organized force or widespread desire exists to excite the Russian people to greater political activity.

The political elite, meanwhile, continue to proffer their complete, if often insincere loyalty to Putin. Not one of them has the slightest wish to perform an act of political self-immolation in the name of "principle" — even if they feel horrified by current events and the prospect of Russia's complete isolation. The same is true of the army and intelligence agencies.

In fact, the current conflict could end with the help of a non-militaristic resolution that also satisfies the expectations of patriots. That is a humanitarian solution. Moscow could help the Russian-speaking people of Ukraine not by sending in tanks, but by offering them refuge in Russia.

The government could collect assistance from ordinary citizens and, if necessary, grant the refugees citizenship and substantial — not symbolic — assistance to start new lives. But instead the ruling regime continues beaming its televised lessons of hate aimed at its neighboring "brotherly" state.

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