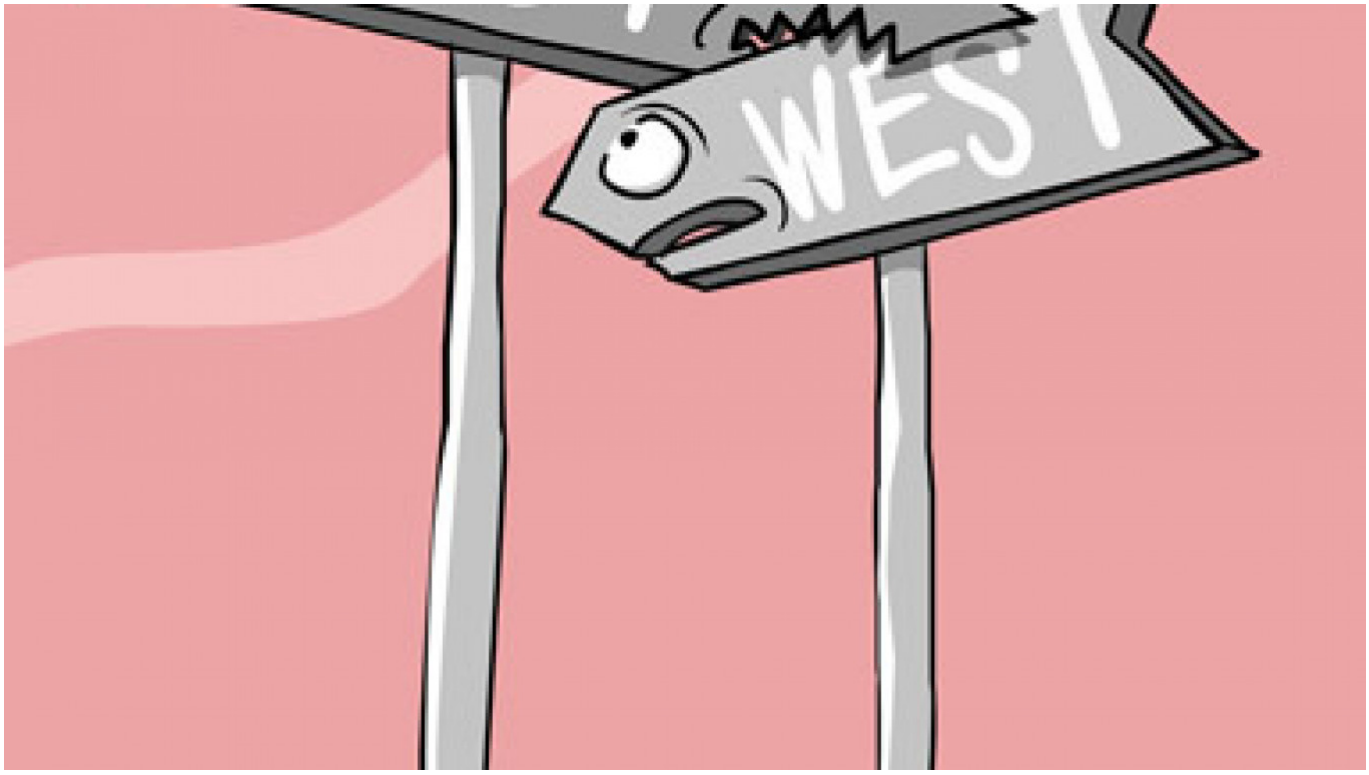
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Reality in Ukraine Obscured by Propaganda War

By Georgy Bovt

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Last week's meeting in Minsk between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart, Petro Poroshenko, looked as if it might halt the downward slide of the Ukrainian crisis and prevent a full-scale war. Unfortunately, that crisis is continuing steadily along its previous course, going from bad to worse.

It is almost beyond belief that a war in the center of Europe can be shrouded in such a thick fog of propaganda and lies when the public has access to so much advanced information technology, social networks, the ubiquitous blogosphere and almost every necessary type of information.

The cloud of misinformation has reached such proportions that now very few people have a clear understanding of what is really happening in Ukraine. The information war has reached such a fever pitch that it has taken on a certain life of its own, like a Frankenstein monster its creator can no longer control.

Moscow, Kiev and the West are waging a campaign of public relations and political rhetoric in parallel with operations on the ground. From a PR standpoint, Russia's convoy of 280 trucks carrying humanitarian aid to eastern Ukraine was a "damage control" stunt to offset the negative PR that Russia earned after the downing of a Malaysian airliner over Ukrainian airspace.

The dominant tone of the information has also changed: Just as the world waited to hear the results of the investigation into the downing of the airliner, that issue was overshadowed by alarming reports of what the West called a "direct Russian invasion" of Ukraine.

It seems the West cannot accept any other explanation for the military success of the pro-Russian separatists. And although Western leaders had said just before and after the meeting in Minsk that additional sanctions against Moscow would be inappropriate, European Union officials held an emergency summit only last Saturday to prepare a new, "third level" of sanctions.

There is also another dynamic at work regarding Ukraine: After imposing each successively harsher set of sanctions, the West "checks in" with its victim to ask: "Hello, partners, have we tightened the noose enough for you yet? Can you still breathe? Are you ready to beg for mercy or sit down for serious talks now? No? Then with all due respect and although we greatly value our friendship, we will now impose even harsher sanctions."

What's more, the West uses this same approach for every "uncooperative" state, not just Russia. And yet everyone has their own understanding of what it means to "sit down for serious talks." At present, nobody shows any willingness to compromise, making "serious talks" improbable.

While continuing to claim that Russia is not directly involved in the conflict, Putin has given only a vague indication of what he actually wants: autonomy for Ukraine's eastern regions and at least unofficial guarantees of its non-aligned status. Of course, Crimea is not on the bargaining table. Putin possibly said as much to Poroshenko during their meeting in Minsk, to which the Ukrainian president apparently replied: "I can't agree to that."

And it is obvious he can't. He is president of a country that — even in the midst of a war — is splintered by inter-clan and inter-regional conflicts, intrigues and squabbles. At any moment, Poroshenko might have to face his own Maidan, impeachment or a knife in the back from one of his colleagues. Unfortunately — at least in this situation — he is not a dictator.

What's more, Putin's assessment of Poroshenko as a worthy and responsible partner might, given current political conditions in that country, mean the "kiss of death" for the Ukrainian president.

Putin probably responded to Poroshenko by saying: "Well, in that case, there's nothing I can do. Those separatist militias just won't listen to me. You'd better speak to them yourself." After that, the war in Ukraine intensified, and the separatists made a push to break through to the Sea of Azov.

The current "hybrid" war is only good in comparison with open, full-scale warfare. But this form of war cannot last long. It follows its own internal, entirely military logic of strikes,

counterstrikes, new military objectives, involvement of additional military forces, increasingly extreme acts of brutality, the loss of life and the desire to avenge those deaths.

The current "hybrid war" is especially bad in that there is no plan for a resolution because leaders had no clearly defined or conceptualized goals going into it. True, they have certain tactical goals, but those objectives are constantly changing.

Only the main motivation behind the conflict remains unchanged: show those damn Westerners that Moscow means business and force them to respect Russia. Gradually and ineluctably, what started as a "hybrid" war is degenerating into all-out war

Meanwhile, the West imposes each dose of sanctions in the belief that they will somehow jolt Moscow leaders back into reality — that is, reality as it is understood in Brussels and Washington. But the West always holds even more severe sanctions in reserve, just in case those bullheaded leaders in Moscow persist in their ways.

But the sanctions are producing the opposite effect. Those "guys over in Moscow" — especially Putin — are becoming even more militant and obdurate. At the same time, reason is increasingly giving way to a purely tit-for-tat exchange of blows.

That can eventually push leaders into an almost euphoric state in which they believe they have nothing more to lose and begin having thoughts of "victory at any price."

At this point is seems that if the separatist militias can hold out until October and the onset of the cold season, the other side might agree to put down its weapons and negotiate. But after October, all the resources needed by the separatists to maintain the current "hybrid war" will be completely exhausted. If the conflict does not end then, Russian troops will openly invade Ukraine.

At that point, even the threat of a disruption to Russian oil and gas shipments to Europe might not prove a restraining factor to the parties in this conflict. Russia wonders why nobody else is willing to consider its demands and accept some of its terms. Meanwhile, the West makes almost no effort to explain its own thinking to Russia. And so both sides continue to do battle while living in two different realities.

Georgy Bovt is a political analyst.

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