

The West Needs to Start Facing Facts in Ukraine

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As has been the case for the past several months of increasingly nasty low-level warfare, it's very difficult to tell exactly what is going on right now in Ukraine.

A cease-fire announced on Friday appears to be holding, though there are allegations of violations by both sides. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and President Vladimir Putin spoke by phone a day after the initial implementation and expressed their "mutual satisfaction that the sides of the conflict were observing the cease-fire regime."

Considering the way this conflict has gone thus far, it would be extremely unwise to put too much faith in these optimistic declarations: throughout the conflict, several of the worst periods of violence have followed closely on the heels of apparent de-escalations.

It won't shock anybody if the current cease-fire collapses in spectacular fashion.

However it is at the very least possible that the violence has come to an end and that some sort

of political reconciliation process will soon begin. Therefore, it seems like an opportune moment to take stock of where Ukraine is and where it is heading.

Unfortunately, Western coverage of events in Kiev has been relentlessly optimistic.

There's been precious little willingness on the part of Western politicians to look at the numerous flaws of the current government in Kiev, and a disturbing tendency to explain away any of its poor decisions as really being the fault of the Russians.

This is a standard dynamic in proxy conflicts, where pointing out the flaws of an ally is, at best, considered impolite and, at worst, considered treasonous. When it's truly a matter of "us" versus "them," most people agree that it's just not appropriate to note that some of the people on our side are a little less than perfect.

I've never been satisfied with this dynamic. If the West is going to aid the Ukrainian government in its struggle against Moscow — and this has very rapidly become the consensus position in both Washington and Brussels — we should have a clear idea of who it is we are helping.

One of the most vocal commentators on Ukraine, Yale University history professor Timothy Snyder, has provided a very convenient answer: by helping Ukraine we are helping people who share our values and who want nothing more than to be like us.

In this account the new government values free speech, respects dissent, is suspicious of nationalism, and eschews right-wing extremists. Snyder has repeatedly and publicly argued that any of the alleged flaws of the current Ukrainian government, such as its supposed anti-Russian proclivities or its support of extreme right-wingers, are nothing more than the fever dreams of Kremlin propagandists.

The problem is that the reality is quite a bit uglier and more complicated. American journalist Keith Gessen recently wrote a masterful account of his experiences in Donetsk, and the Ukrainian government he describes bears very little relationship whatsoever to the merry band of liberal democrats described by Snyder.

Gessen describes professors being threatened with being found guilty of having "separatist tendencies" if they "sabotaged" the anti-terror operation in the east, email accounts being set up to make anonymous denunciations easier, and a general atmosphere of indifference to the civilian casualties certain to result from the use of heavy artillery and unguided rockets.

Snyder has also claimed that the far-right is weaker in Ukraine than in almost any other European country. The problem with this claim can easily be seen in the Ukrainian government's use of armed formations like the Azov battalion.

For the uninitiated, Azov is an openly — indeed almost cartoonishly — neo-Nazi outfit that has been fighting alongside the Ukrainian army against the separatists in the east. It would be nice if such an outfit existed only in the collective consciousness of Russian officialdom, but it is a very real, and very scary, group of people.

In my interactions with various Eastern Europe analysts, I've discovered that people will simultaneously argue that the Ukrainian far-right is weak, unpopular, and marginalized,

while simultaneously arguing that you can't blame the Ukrainian government for making use of people like those who comprise the Azov brigade.

Now, logically, both of these can't be true: if the far-right is really miniscule in size, it won't be of any use as a military ally.

If the extreme right is of use as a military ally then it can't be miniscule in size. Kiev's decision to employ the Azov battalion, to funnel it money and weapons, ought to clarify which narrative it finds more persuasive.

The existence of the Azov battalion and the various kinds of repression described by Gessen absolutely do not mean that everyone in Ukraine with anti-Russian views is a knuckle-dragging "fascist" or that the current

Ukrainian government is an authoritarian one.

What it does mean is that we should be more attuned to what the Ukrainian government is doing and more aware of the many mistakes it is making.

Only by doing so can we understand what is actually happening in Ukraine, instead of what we want to happen.

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