

Russia Expresses 'Deep Concern' Over Ukraine's Decentralization Plan

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko gestures as he proposes his project of changes in the constitution on decentralizing power in Kiev, Ukraine, July 1, 2015.

MOSCOW/KIEV — Russia expressed "deep concern" on Thursday over Ukraine's plans to decentralize power as part of a peace deal with separatist rebels, underlining the gulf between Moscow and Kiev as the conflict rumbles on despite a ceasefire.

Differing interpretations of a February peace agreement signed in Minsk, Belarus, to end the fighting in Ukraine's eastern regions have left the conflict in limbo, with more than 6,500 people killed since it broke out in April last year.

Adding to the tensions, negotiations broke down in Vienna this week over Russian gas supplies to Ukraine, leading to imports being halted at the border between the two ex-Soviet countries.

Ukraine and the West accuse Moscow of arming and supporting pro-Russian rebels fighting government troops. Moscow denies the charges.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko on Wednesday presented a blueprint to give Ukraine's regions more powers and control over their budgets, one of 13 points in the Minsk deal that would allow the rebel-controlled regions a degree of self-governance.

He said the moves would amount to a "vaccination" against federalization, which Kiev says would give the separatist-minded regions too much independence and allow them to block Ukraine's shift towards joining the European mainstream.

Moscow has said it favors much more autonomy for the self-proclaimed people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, collectively known as the Donbass, although they should remain part of Ukraine.

Voicing Russia's concern, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters: "The preparation of such laws without taking into consideration the opinions of the representatives of the Donbass can hardly be seen as the fulfillment of the Minsk agreements."

Poroshenko pointedly described the Ukrainian plan as an alternative to "despotism."

"Finally, decentralization will become another civilizational difference from our post-Soviet neighbors," he told reporters. "True self-government is impossible in an authoritarian state. Despotism admits neither independence of communities, nor freedom of its citizens."

Alexander Zakharchenko, self-appointed head of the Donetsk region, complained he and his Luhansk counterpart Igor Plotnitsky had not been consulted over the changes.

"Neither I, nor my colleague Plotnitsky, gave agreement to Poroshenko's proposed conception of constitutional reform," he told the DAN rebel news agency.

Donetsk has called a local election for Oct. 18, a week before the rest of Ukraine, a move that would be "destructive," Poroshenko was quoted by Interfax-Ukraine news agency as saying.

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