

Poroshenko Losing Time as Discontent Grows

By [Maksim Vikhrov](#)

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Last week saw the worst violence in the Ukrainian capital since the Maidan protests at the end of 2013. On Aug. 31 radical oppositionists accused the government of treachery for pushing through legislation on decentralization aimed specifically at the war-torn Donbass. They threw rocks, smoke flares, and even hand grenades at the police. Three people were killed and more than 130 injured.

Now observers are asking how much support the opponents of President Petro Poroshenko's decentralization strategy enjoy and whether they are strong enough to undermine his government.

The president's main argument is that Ukraine has to live up to the Minsk agreements to avoid a full-blown war with Russia. He has been a consistent proponent of decentralization — a policy of granting more powers of self-administration and language rights to the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. His plans have the support of Ukraine's Western allies, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk and the largest faction in the parliament.

He is certainly powerful enough to get the legislation he wants through parliament. The parliament has approved his bill granting an amnesty to those who fought in the spring of 2014 and his bill granting special status for the separatist-controlled areas of the Donbass. Opposition deputies complained of arm-twisting and procedural violations during the vote, which was carried out in the worst traditions of the regime of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

But opposition to decentralization in Ukraine now extends beyond the most vocal fringe groups. The country now has a powerful "anti-Minsk" coalition. In the parliament it consists of Samopomich (Self-Reliance), Batkivshchina (Fatherland), and Oleg Lyashko's Radical Party.

"The Minsk agreement is a tactic the Kremlin uses to buy time," said former prime minister and head of Batkivshchina Yulia Tymoshenko. Oleg Lyashko agreed, describing the agreements as a "time bomb."

Several regional legislatures, such as the one in Ivano-Frankivsk, also oppose the Minsk agreements. As the current government loses its popularity, radicals may gain some ground during the upcoming local elections. While the local elections will not change the balance of forces in the parliament, they may impact the president: his predecessor suffered from the attempts of regional legislatures who were trying to impeach him.

However, the street radicals pose the most serious threat. Right Sector activists recently burned tires on the streets of Kiev, demanding that the government renounce the Minsk agreements and resume the offensive in the Donbass. No one was hurt on that occasion. But then came the explosion of violence on Aug. 31.

According to Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, a volunteer fighter on leave from the front was behind the grenade-throwing incident. Although the grenade thrower and other protestors were quickly arrested, there can be no guarantee that incidents like this will not be repeated, especially as Ukrainians are divided on this incident.

The street violence comes against a background of disappointment with the authorities across Ukrainian society. Militant patriots resent the fact that the summer offensive did not result in a glorious victory. For the past year they have been trying to convince the public that the Donbass republics could have been eradicated back in August last year.

"It's still not too late to do it, in a day or in a matter of months," they say. "But the traitors in Kiev do not give their go-ahead and drag the country into the Minsk trap instead."

Just as a year ago, about 30 percent of Ukrainians were in favor of military intervention to liberate the occupied territories. The closer you get to the actual front line, the less militant people become. While 35 percent support the war in Ukraine's western and central regions, only 15 percent and 20 percent hold the same views in the south and east.

Moreover, six draft campaigns have also depleted the bellicose sentiments in western regions known for strong nationalism. Only 41 percent of eligible draftees were enlisted in the six drafts in Ternopil. In the Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk regions, the numbers are 47 percent and 44 percent, respectively. Across the country, only 60 percent of the target number were

drafted across the country. The General Staff plans to make up the shortfall in numbers by employing contract soldiers.

Most Ukrainians (57 percent) still want to see a peaceful resolution of the conflict. But they are also dissatisfied with the lack of tangible results at the negotiating table. Thirty-six percent of Ukrainians believe that Kiev is doing too little to solve the Donbass problem and 33 percent think it is doing nothing at all.

The president gets a disapproval rating of 67 percent from Ukrainians, while 84 percent are unhappy with the prime minister and the parliament. As their fatigue increases, a growing number of Ukrainians are ready for compromise. Almost half of them agree that Russian can become an official language if it helps to end the war. Thirty-three percent are ready to permanently give up on Crimea. The same number is willing to abandon the European integration project, and an even greater number can live without NATO membership.

Opinion polls also suggest that about 19 percent of the Ukrainian public is prepared to recognize the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, while 26 percent support their autonomous status inside Ukraine.

The surveys suggest that time isn't on the side of the Ukrainian authorities. As long as the Donbass region remains in its current "neither peace, nor war" state, public discontent is bound to increase — from all sides of the political spectrum.

Maksim Vikhrov is a Kiev-based journalist who previously worked in the Donbass. [This comment](#) originally appeared on Carnegie Moscow's Eurasia Outlook blog.

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