The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Political Infighting Is Destabilizing Ukraine (Op-Ed)

Ukraine should prioritize domestic governance while building trust at home and credibility abroad.

By Bogdan Belei and Balazs Jarabik

April 13, 2017

A man holds the Ukrainian national flag at Independence Square in Kiev, Ukraine. **Sergei Chuzavkov / AP**

While U.S. President Donald Trump and other Western leaders appear all too happy to ignore the Ukraine crisis, tensions are once again on the rise.

Fighting has flared intermittently in the Donbass recently. A turncoat from the Russian security services, Denis Voronenkov, was gunned down in broad daylight in central Kiev. A new economic blockade and attacks on Russian banking interests inside Ukraine are interrupting what little economic ties remain between the two countries.

Why is all of this happening now? It's easy to chalk these developments to the fact that the

conflict is not actually frozen. So long as it remains unresolved, there are bound to be flare-ups, any of which might tip the disquiet into a dangerous spiral of violence.

What is missing from this analysis is the corrosive impact of Ukraine's messy domestic politics, the intensity of political infighting among Ukraine's elites, and the government's tendency to use geopolitics to mobilize Western support.

At the same time, Kiev is constrained. It cannot fight and win a military conflict against its larger and belligerent neighbor. Western partners obviously want Ukraine to rebuild and succeed, but they are not eager to see the conflict with Russia intensify. Rather, they want Kyiv to adhere to its obligations under the Minsk Agreements.

But for most Ukrainians, resisting Russian aggression feels justified and appropriate. The Ukrainian military has become one of the most trusted institutions in the country and volunteer battalions boast high popularity among the public.

This puts Ukranian president Petro Poroshenko between a rock and a hard place. Moscow and Western partners criticize him all the time for not doing enough to support the peace process. Meanwhile, his domestic opponents hold him responsible for pursuing trade and diplomatic interactions with the aggressor.

Adding to the mess, some key members of the Ukrainian elite have manipulated the war with Russia to advance their political and business interests. The 2014 Revolution of Dignity and Russian aggression have opened the way for a significant redistribution of assets. Most of the oligarchs — Poroshenko being a key exception — have seen their fortunes shrink due to what can be described as "de facto de-oligarchization". Key vehicles for corruption inside Ukraine such as the gas trade previously overseen by power broker Dmytro Firtash (who is currently fighting extradition to the U.S.), have been eliminated. Thanks to the rise of smuggling and weapons trading schemes, the war in Donbass has also become a money-making proposition.

The other factor is the desire of Poroshenko's opponents to knock him down a peg. Radical tactics, such as the recently imposed economic blockade of Donbass or the attacks on Russian-controlled banks in Kiev have allowed the opposition to hijack attention and weaken the wide-ranging authority of the Poroshenko team.

Starting in December 2016, a small number of activists and Donbass veterans, with help from opposition politicians and several oligarchs, have disrupted trade between Ukraine and the statelets controlled by the Russian-backed separatists. Then in mid-March another group of ultra-nationalists, the Azov Battalion, launched an attack on the central office of Russia`s state-owned Sberbank in Kiev by boarding up the entrance with cinderblocks.

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The interesting part is what happened next. On the same day, March 13, the government mounted several attempts to interrupt the blockade by force. Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman had publicly portrayed it as "sabotage against the nation." But on March 15,

President Poroshenko ordered the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) to embrace the blockade as official state policy.

Sanctions on five Russian banks followed the next day. For the second time in two years, the government was forced to adopt a controversial economic blockade pushed by activist groups and the government's opponents. The move confirmed the Ukrainian state's vulnerability to dramatic policy U-turns that jeopardize its ability to reunify the country and put it on a path toward sustainable economic prosperity.

Of course, Kiev's propensity to blame Russia for all that ails Ukraine is logical — it has been an effective tactic for keeping the West onside. For President Poroshenko, the Russian threat is a ready-made excuse for foot-dragging in key reform areas and a way to buy himself breathing room from pushy Western partners.

In the long term, these tactics may boomerang on President Poroshenko. His ties to various vested interests contribute to an inability to overcome infighting within the elite and deliver on his commitments to international partners on issues such as corruption. The longer this drags on, the greater the risk of further damage to the Poroshenko government's credibility.

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Ukraine's best tool to defend itself against Russia is to deliver on the tough reforms, which Poroshenko embraced when he first took power almost three years ago. Western support can only do so much. Integration of the country's diverse regions and competing interest groups cannot be completed without a sincere attempt to promote reconciliation with the regions in the East. Weak governance is a big part of why Poroshenko's popularity remains stuck in the mid-single digits. Even though Ukraine has made huge strides over the past three years, the level of dysfunction reminds many citizens of Viktor Yushchenko`s rule after the Orange Revolution.

Unfortunately, Ukraine's considerable achievements to date have been often under-valued at home and among Western partners. The government's impressive work on key reforms such as macroeconomic consolidation and cleaning up the energy and banking sectors rarely make media headlines.

Any hopes for a breakthrough with Russia are probably unrealistic, but the focal point should be on prioritizing domestic governance issues while building trust at home and credibility abroad. The West can help — but only if Kiev addresses a culture of rampant impunity, the lack of inclusive justice and the narrowing space for political pluralism at home.

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