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Russian policy towards Ukraine: not just Crimea

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Russia is escalating its conflict with Ukraine, as evidenced, for example, by the Moscow-controlled Crimean parliament's declaration of independence of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea on 11 March and its decision to hold a referendum on March 16 on accession to the Russian Federation. In this way, Russia is increasing pressure on the West and on the authorities in Kyiv to concede Russia's claim to shape the political system and constitution of Ukraine, as well as the composition of the new Ukrainian government. At the same time, Moscow has rejected the proposals submitted by the West to settle the conflict, thus demonstrating its lack of concern about the likelihood of adoption of sanctions by the European Union and the United States.

In turn, the authorities in Kyiv claim that Russia has committed an act of military aggression against Ukraine, and have ruled out the possibility of separating Crimea from Ukraine. Kyiv's efforts to resolve the conflict are mainly focused on diplomacy, by trying to persuade the West to exert effective pressure on Russia. In domestic politics, the Ukrainian government is seeking to counteract efforts to destabilise the situation in the southern and eastern regions, and to take legal steps invalidating the decisions of the authorities of Crimea, including the referendum on the continued status of the peninsula.

From a military point of view, Russia has taken almost total control over Crimea, with the participation of local self-defence forces, and assembled a significant military presence in the regions bordering on Ukraine. In turn, the general mobilisation announced by the authorities in Kyiv has run into serious problems due to the weakness of the Ukrainian army. It seems that there will be no use of force to reoccupy Ukrainian military sites on the peninsula before the referendum scheduled for 16 March. At the same time, it remains possible that Russia will try to move the conflict to other regions of Ukraine.

Russia plays the Crimea card

There is no doubt that both the decision to bring forward the date for the referendum on the status of Crimea, and the declaration of independence by the Crimean parliament, were inspired by Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry stated on 11 March that the Crimean declaration of independence was legally valid, and that Russia would recognise the results of the referendum. In parallel with the efforts to annex Crimea, the Russian authorities have also been devising the legal instruments which will allow it to act more broadly in Ukraine and throughout the post-Soviet area. On 6 March the Russian government approved a bill to simplify the acquisition of Russian citizenship, allowing Russian-speaking foreigners (also in practice including the majority of Ukrainians) to apply for citizenship or right of residence in

Russia on an expedited basis. At the same time Moscow has taken a harsher line towards the current government of Ukraine, which was particularly strongly expressed by the statement made by Viktor Yanukovych in Rostov-on-Don, where he very sharply questioned the legitimacy of the current government of Ukraine, declared the *de facto* disintegration of Ukraine, and promised his return to Kyiv.

By raising the tension on Crimea, Russia wants to increase pressure on the West and the Ukrainian authorities, in order to force them to take Moscow's opinions on the future shape of Ukraine's political system and on the personal composition of the Ukrainian government institutions into account. It is very likely that Russia will recognise the independence of Crimea; Moscow's next step may be to incorporate it into the Russian Federation. However, it is possible that the Kremlin will postpone the formal annexation of Crimea into the Russian Federation in order to use the issue of the peninsula's status as a means of influencing the authorities in Kyiv; and to foster efforts to form pro-Russian ruling bodies in eastern and southern Ukraine. Moscow has consistently worked to deprive the current Ukrainian authorities of international legitimacy, and to create a new government which would be favourably inclined towards Russia. At the same time, it seems that at present Moscow is having great difficulty finding a political force in Ukraine that could guarantee its interests, which is why it is seeking to delay the presidential elections scheduled for 25 May. The Kremlin has indicated, most strongly in the speech by Viktor Yanukovych, that it will try to sabotage the elections, and even if they are held, it will not recognise the winner as president.

The Kremlin is not afraid of Western sanctions

Towards the end of last week, intensive diplomatic contacts between Western capitals developed an outline of a common position that the West could adopt in reaction to Russia's actions towards Ukraine. On 7 March the US Secretary of State John Kerry presented this position to the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov: the West demands withdrawal of Russian troops back to their bases in Crimea; the cancellation of the referendum on independence; the end to destabilising activities in eastern and southern Ukraine; the admission of the OSCE observer mission to Crimea; and the establishment of a contact group, made up of representatives of the new government in Kyiv, Russia and Western countries. If Moscow continues to refuse to participate in the proposed contact group, Washington and Brussels threatened to tighten the hitherto purely symbolic sanctions. The European Union has warned that it would subject Russian decision-makers to visa bans and asset freezes, and has indicated that it will respond with broader economic sanctions if Russia further escalates the conflict.

The Russian diplomatic response (the *de facto* rejection of proposals presented by the US Secretary of State Kerry, as well as the content of the Russian counterproposal) indicates that the Kremlin has so far interpreted Western diplomatic efforts as a sign that the West is not prepared to introduce real sanctions. Russian diplomacy is firmly restating its position that Russia is not a party to the conflict; that the problem that need to be addressed is the lack of legitimacy and unrepresentative nature of the new government in Kyiv; and that the actions taken by the Crimean authorities and the aid Moscow has given them do not constitute a violation of international law. The rhetoric and argumentation used by Minister

Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Ministry and other Russian politicians (such as Valentina Matvienko, the chairwoman of the Federation Council) indicate that Russia is building up justification for a further escalation, both in Crimea (as evidenced by Crimea's declaration of independence on 11 March), and in the rest of Ukraine, where Russia has ascribed itself the role of guarantor of the human rights, especially for the population of southern and eastern Ukraine, which is allegedly subject to discrimination and ill-treatment by the current authorities in Kyiv.

Kyiv and Russia's military intervention

The Ukrainian authorities are seeking to resolve the crisis through political and diplomatic means, and at least at this stage, a military response from Kyiv to Russia's actions seems unlikely. Kyiv is counteracting the secession of Crimea by taking action on a legal basis, and by making it technically more difficult to hold the referendum on the future status of the peninsula. On 7 March, the acting president of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchynov issued a decree annulling the resolution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea's parliament on the plebiscite, declaring that it did not accord with the constitution of Ukraine. On 11 March, in response to Crimea's declaration of independence, the Ukrainian parliament launched a procedure to dissolve the Crimean parliament and called for a boycott of the referendum. In turn, the Central Election Commission has prevented the Crimean authorities from gaining access to the voter registration databases. At the same time, the Ukrainian authorities have declared their readiness to carry out a public consultation on extending the peninsula's autonomy within Ukraine, as well as the decentralisation of the state.

Kyiv is also trying to counteract subversive activities by Russia in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, which has resulted in a partial decrease in tension there. The Border Service has taken action to seal the frontier (over the last week around 3500 persons suspected of planning subversive activities have been prevented from crossing from Russia into Ukraine), and law enforcement authorities have sought to neutralise the separatist leaders. In Donetsk Pavel Gubariev was arrested, as was Arsen Klinchayev in Lugansk. Meanwhile in Odessa, an investigation has been launched into the activities of Anton Davidchenko, the leader of the local pro-Russian protests. At the same time, Kyiv is trying to present a 'positive deal', including upholding the language law of 2012 which favours the Russian language in those regions, and promising to give the Ukrainian regions greater powers within the planned reform of the administrative and political system. The new Ukrainian authorities are taking a definite stand on the territorial integrity of the state, have ruled out the possibility of ceding Crimea, and have demonstrated a unified and unambiguously critical position on the Russian aggression. In turn, the Party of Regions, which has been undergoing a crisis since losing power, is adopting a position of 'wait and see' before its conference scheduled for 22 March, when a new leader will be elected.

The Ukrainian authorities' actions also show that they are pinning their main hope for a resolution to the Crimean crisis on the internationalisation of the conflict. Kyiv has confirmed its intention to solve the problem by diplomatic and political methods, and has called for the establishment of a tripartite commission with representatives from the West, Russia and Ukraine to solve the crisis in Crimea. The government is mainly counting on help from the countries, particularly the US and the UK, which were signatories to the so-called

Budapest Memorandum (an international agreement signed in 1994 providing for Kyiv to transfer its nuclear weapons to Russia, in return for a guarantee from the parties of the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine), and the fulfilment of their obligations as contained in the document. Acting president Turchynov, acting prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Yulia Tymoshenko and Vitali Klitschko all spoke in this spirit. This issue was also one of the topics of the conversation between the head of the Ukrainian government and US President Barack Obama in Washington on 12 March. Kyiv is seeking greater EU involvement in solving the crisis. Kyiv's readiness to sign the political part of the Association Agreement, apart from meeting one of the Maidan's main demands, is also designed to draw the EU's institutions deeper into the Ukraine crisis, and to shift part of the burden, and responsibility for its solution, onto Brussels. The EU has declared its political support for Ukraine on this issue, and has offered a package of economic assistance, including €610 million of immediate financial aid and the abolition of import tariffs on Ukrainian goods. The EU has further announced that it will provide €11.18 billion in support, of which €3.18 billion will come from the EU budget (€1.57 billion in development aid, and MFA loans of €1.61 billion), as well as up to €8 billion mainly in the form of loans from the European Investment Bank (€3 billion) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (€5 billion). It should be noted, however, that of the financial aid announced only €1 billion represents new funding; Ukraine had already been entitled to the rest beforehand. In addition, the money will not be provided immediately, but will be transferred in instalments up to 2020. This is also the maximum amount that Ukraine can get; how much it actually receives will depend on progress in reforms, as well as how effectively the projects financed by these funds are prepared and implemented.

The military aspect of the conflict

Within a week of the start of the military operation in Crimea on 28 February, units of the Russian army, supported by local self-defence formations, had occupied the peninsula almost entirely. They also established fortified Russian checkpoints on roads leading to Crimea from the Ukrainian mainland, especially on the militarily sensitive Perekop isthmus. Russian reconnaissance detachments also took up positions on the peninsula bordering parts of the Kherson region (the town of Henichesk). Most of the Ukrainian army's bases remain under their control, although they are blockaded and practically devoid of any opportunities to act (especially the Air Force and Navy units). In view of the continuing blockade and pressure on them (some of the units have had their energy and water supplies cut off), their situation should be considered severe. Nevertheless, it should be assumed that they will not be taken by force at least until the referendum on 16 March. The parties have still not been brought to open confrontation, and nor have there been any random victims. The *de facto* authorities in Simferopol have started the creation of an 'Armed Forces of the Autonomous Region' on the basis of local self-defence formations, and of property taken over from the Ukrainian army.

7-8 March saw the start of a new phase of military action, as Russia and Ukraine started to move large groupings of troops towards the potential theatre of operations. The Ukrainian units are mainly being deployed in the Kherson region, while the Russian side is systematically building up its forces in Crimea; units from the Armed Forces of the Russian

Federation of the North Caucasus Military District are also being sent in that direction. The Ukrainian side has officially presented its troop movements as regular exercises and readiness tests.

In connection with the total embargo on information about troop movements on the Russian side, the Ukrainian side has become the main source for such information. Acting defence minister Ihor Teniukh announced on 11 March that on Crimea and the Ukrainian border there are a total of 220,000 Russian soldiers armed with 1800 tanks, 400 helicopters, 160 aircraft and 60 ships. It should be assumed that Teniukh mentioned the *de facto* total number of Black Sea Fleet units, Russian Ground Forces, Army Airborne, *Spetsnaz* and Air Force units participating in the exercises conducted in February and March by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Western Military District, as well as those stationed in the Southern Military District. However, there are now about 30,000 Russian soldiers in Crimea (including about 18,000 transferred there since the start of operations). The Russian army is also conducting permanent exercises in the military districts neighbouring Ukraine (even though they are formally different projects), which clearly indicate that they could rapidly become involved in activities on the territory of Ukraine itself.

The likely failure of the mobilisation announced on 2 March by the new authorities in Kyiv was demonstrated by the announcement on 11 March by acting president Turchynov of a partial mobilisation in connection with the threat from Russia. It is assumed that, despite a sufficient number of volunteers and the relatively smooth functioning of the draft boards, there are insufficient financial resources and materials to adequately equip and train reservists. Acting defence minister Teniukh also referred to the problems related to achieving full combat readiness on 11 March. The lack of investment in the modernisation and development of the Armed Forces of Ukraine over many years also proved to be decisive in this matter. According to Teniukh, of the 41,000 soldiers of the Ukrainian Ground Forces, only 6000 are in a state of full readiness. At the moment – which Teniukh did not say – the backbone of the Ukrainian army groupings in the southern regions adjacent to Crimea are the three airmobile brigades located there, and most of those units were moved there from western Ukraine.

For purely military reasons we should rule out the possibility of any Ukrainian efforts to restore control over Crimea. The activity of the Ukrainian army in such a case would be limited to trying to prevent, or at least inconvenience, the Russian army from extending its military operation to other regions of the country. At the same time – taking into account Russia's political objectives towards Ukraine, which apply not only to Crimea, but the entire state – a more likely variant of the situation is the Russian Army preparing to shift its operations from Crimea to the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. On the one hand, this would exert pressure and increase the impact of the situation in these regions, as well as on the central government in Kyiv. On the other hand, in the case of the southern regions, which are pivotal for the functioning of Crimea's (power plants, pipelines), taking them over would prevent the peninsula being cut off from these supplies.