

Russia's hapless strategy for eastern Ukraine

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On 13–16 March the main cities of southern and eastern Ukraine again saw demonstrations held to call for unification with Russia and for autonomy to be granted to particular provinces. Counter-demonstrations were also held in support of Ukraine's territorial integrity and to protest against war. Pro-Russian demonstrators made attempts to occupy provincial state administration buildings and hoisted Russian flags on them. The police acted with great restraint as it removed the flags and cleared the buildings of groups of protesters after the demonstration ended. In Donetsk there were clashes between the participants of the two demonstrations (one person was killed) and in Kharkiv a pro-Russian local militia attacked members of Ukrainian patriotic organisations claiming the lives of two people. In the following days further demonstrations in support of Ukraine's territorial integrity were staged while paramilitary groups targeted the Ukrainian armed forces.

Commentary

- The pro-Russian demonstrations brought together fewer people than in the previous days, which indicates that there is little support for these districts to secede from Ukraine and the readiness to fight for them is rather insignificant. The declining numbers of protesters and their flagging determination after Ukraine has tightened control at the border (and also detained the leaders of the protests) prove that the earlier demonstrations were to a large extent staged by paramilitary groups from Russia.
- It is worth noting that the recent protests were limited to six provincial cities: Kharkiv, Donetsk, Odesa, Luhansk, Mykolayiv and Dnipropetrovsk. There were no attempts to mount them in provincial towns such as Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk or Makiivka. The fact that organisers of the demonstrations in the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces brought protesters from the areas around the towns corroborates the thesis that there is little potential for support for this action: protests in a dozen towns and cities would be more important, both in terms of propaganda and politics.
- The recent protests in eastern and southern Ukraine prove that inhabitants of these regions are opposed to the country being centralised—they want greater scope in the decision-making process for issues which affect them (opponents of separatism also support this demand). With a growing awareness in civil society, encouraged by the events in Kyiv (regardless of the attitude to the Maidan, it is an example of self-organisation and determination) the reconstruction of Ukraine's political system towards a model based on local governments and their autonomy is becoming inevitable.

- Everything indicates that Russia has incorrectly assessed the atmosphere in eastern and southern Ukraine, neglecting their citizens' attachment to the state and the fear of war. In this situation Russia will probably further pursue subversive action but it remains an open question whether it will abandon for the time being the idea of taking these regions from Ukraine or if it will decide to rapidly annexe them.