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Russia to Ukraine: subversion and diplomacy

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The Kremlin has decided not to take advantage of either the limited armed clashes in the Donetsk region, or the tragedy in Odessa on 2 May, to begin a military invasion of 'continental' Ukraine, although earlier warnings from the Russian side had suggested such apossibility. Vladimir Putin has instead opted for a 'peace offensive' via diplomatic channels, the most important element of which was the discussions he held with Didier Burkhalter, the chairman-in-office of the OSCE, on 7 May on a 'road map' to resolve the Ukrainian crisis. According to the statements by both politicians, such a 'map' would first of all involve the cessation of all use of force in eastern Ukraine, the renunciation of violence, the disarming of informal groups, and for Kyiv, with OSCE support, to enter into dialogue with representatives of the Ukrainian regions on the precepts of constitutional reform.

Moscow's adoption of this 'peace offensive' appears to be a deceptive move, and a continuation of the previously used tactic of employing elements of military force on one hand, and on the other presenting itself as a constructive partner striving for a peaceful solution to the conflict. The Kremlin has apparently seen an opportunity to gradually take control of Ukraine (or at least its south-eastern part) by the combined use of sabotage, as well as the political and diplomatic activity. The first track consists in coordinating the activities of the separatists, gradually expanding the area of instability in south-eastern Ukraine. The second track provides cover for these activities, and include political and diplomatic campaigns and propaganda. Moscow's current goal is to weaken the legitimacy and position of the Ukrainian authorities on the international stage, while recognising the separatists of the south-eastern Ukraine as an official party, independent from Russia, to talks on the new constitution and composition of the government of Ukraine. In this context, Russia wants to see international talks involving the pro-Russian opposition to continue, which will increase political pressure on Kyiv. It seems that Russia primarily sees a chance of pushing through its demands in its relations with Germany, which in addition to its own considerable activity, has significant influence on the activities of the Swiss presidency of the OSCE.

Game on: weakening the legitimacy of the government in Kyiv...

Russia has exploited the tragedy in Odessa in a massive campaign of political and propaganda aimed at discrediting and weakening the legitimacy of the authorities in Kyiv. The Russian side has placed full responsibility on Kyiv for the events in Odessa. The president's spokesman Dmitri Peskov has accused the authorities in Kyiv of having "their hands up to the elbows in blood". The Chairman of the Russian State Duma, Sergei

Naryshkin, has called what happened in Odessa "genocide", and the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called it "pure fascism". The Public Chamber (an advisory body appointed by the Kremlin) has announced it would bring an accusation against the Ukrainian authorities at the European Court of Human Rights, accusing them of allowing the tragedy in Odessa. In statements by senior Russian officials, the Ukrainian authorities are increasingly being referred to as a 'junta', and the attempts to legitimise it are called an "immoral" or even "criminal" attitude (as Peskov stated on 2 May). This strategy of undermining the legitimacy of the Kyiv government is intended to worsen its position during talks on the future of Ukraine, and to increase the pressure on it to adopt Moscow's conditions for resolving the conflict. At the same time, by burdening Kyiv with the responsibility for the bloodshed and tension in Ukraine, Moscow is building up its justification for armed intervention, should it decide on such a move in case of the failure of its subversive and diplomatic activities.

… empowering the separatists...

The Kremlin wants to convince international public opinion that the separatists in the south-east of Ukraine are an independent force, representing the will of the local community, without whose accord the situation in Ukraine will not be stabilised. Among other moves, Moscow has used the kidnap of Western military observers in Slaviansk to empower the separatists. Putin stressed that this was a consequence of the fact that those who invited the observers (the authorities in Kyiv) had not agreed upon this with those who actually control the region (the separatists). The release of the hostages (organised by Russia) during the visit to Slaviansk by the Russian President's envoy Vladimir Lukin has been used to improve the images of both Russia and the separatists themselves. On this occasion the Russian Foreign Ministry praised the "courage and humanism of the defenders of the city" (i.e. the separatists) who agreed to release the hostages, despite the military actions of Ukrainian troops and the "thugs of the Right Sector". After his meeting with Didier Burkhalter, Vladimir Putin said that the only way to stabilise the situation in Ukraine is for Kyiv to start talks with the separatists. This was the context in which Putin made his appeal to the separatists to postpone their 'referendum' (planned for May 11) approving the declaration of sovereignty by the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic'; Putin's statement should be read as a way to emphasise the separatists' independence and the need to hold talks with them. By incorporating the separatists as a party to the official dialogue on the future of Ukraine, Russia would gain an argument for the necessity of the changes it expects to be made to Ukraine's political system – changes which would actually transform Ukraine into a confederation of regions. Talks with the separatists would also be a *de jure* admission that it is they, and not Russia, who are a party to the conflict in Ukraine (as the Russian side has repeatedly stated).

... preventing the use of force by Kyiv...

Moscow also wants to increase pressure on the West to prevent Kyiv from stopping the separatist activities in eastern and southern Ukraine. Russia has accused Kyiv of using the military against the civilian population of the Donetsk region. The Russian Foreign Ministry Federation responded to the launch of the anti-terrorist operation in the Donetsk region by calling it a crime that would "lead Ukraine to disaster". In recent days senior Russian

officials have raised the demand that Kyiv refrain from military action against separatists and withdraw the Ukrainian army from south-eastern Ukraine (as Putin did in his talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel). According to preliminary information, a "road map" resolving the Ukrainian crisis would contain a demand that all parties refrain from the use of violence, including military force. In this way, Moscow wants to involve Kyiv in a political process that would permanently preclude the use of force. The condition of refraining from violence would, in Russia's intention, lead to a situation in which the separatists would obtain security guarantees and freedom of action in south-eastern Ukraine. On the other hand, if Kyiv rejected this condition and used force to respond to any provocations by the separatists, this would provide an opportunity to saddle the Ukrainian authorities with the responsibility for the failure of the peace process.

… carrying out constitutional reform...

Moscow has deliberately sent out conflicting signals regarding the presidential elections in Ukraine planned for 25 May. On the one hand, it has used the context of recent events as another reason to prevent the elections. For example, referring to the events in Odessa, the president's spokesman Dmitri Peskov said that in the current situation it was absurd to talk about holding elections in Ukraine. Vladislav Grib, a representative of the Public Chamber, announced that it intends to submit an official request to the United Nations and Council of Europe to postpone the presidential elections in Ukraine on 25 May until a time when the situation in the country has stabilised. At the same time Moscow has been sending signals (as Putin did on 17 April and 7 May, for example) that elections may take place under certain conditions (a cessation of the use of force, the presence of observers, the freedom of the election campaign, and above all political guarantees concerning constitutional reform). In this way, seeing Kyiv's determination and the West's attachment to the idea of holding elections on 25 May in Ukraine, Russia wants – in return for giving up its open sabotage – to obtain guarantees that Ukraine will accept the political solutions postulated by Moscow which are aimed at transforming it into a confederation of regions. The Kremlin's conflicting signals on the Ukrainian elections may also be an attempt to deepen divisions within the Ukrainian ruling elite.

… and winning over Germany...

Although Russia had hitherto clearly seen the United States as the main partner in talks about Ukraine, in the light of the relatively hard-line US policy of the introduction of further sanctions, in recent days the main channel of dialogue between Russia and the West on Ukraine has become Germany. As the situation in south-eastern Ukraine worsened during the first days of May, Vladimir Putin spoke twice with Angela Merkel, demanding a halt to the military operation and the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the regions of the separatists' activity, a dialogue between Kyiv and representatives of south-eastern Ukraine, and the start of constitutional reform, which was a repetition of the main demands of the so-called Lavrov memorandum – the Russian view of the settlement of the conflict in Ukraine. The release of the military observers detained by separatists, who included four German nationals, was a gesture aimed at winning the favour of the German government. It seems that the Kremlin is hoping that the attitude of Berlin could promote the progressive

realisation of Moscow's policy objectives towards Ukraine. These calculations, it seems, have a certain justification. The intense political consultations between German politicians and the Swiss presidency of the OSCE over recent days most likely had a direct impact on the preparation of the plan put forward by Burkhalter in Moscow. Commenting on his meeting with President Burkhalter, Putin said that he supports Angela Merkel's idea of organising round table talks with representatives of the regions. The published elements of the 'road map' put forward by the OSCE largely coincide with the plan to resolve the crisis in Ukraine announced by the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and published on 6 May in the pages of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which in turn draws on the content of the Lavrov memorandum. Statements by German politicians further indicate that Berlin supports dialogue with 'unarmed' separatists.

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