

Putin's Trap

Why Ukraine Should Withdraw from Russian-Held Donbas

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Figurines of former pro-Russian separatist commander Igor Strelkov from the collection entitled "Toy Soldiers of Novorossiya" on display at a workshop in Moscow, August 29, 2014. (Sergei Karpukhin / Courtesy Reuters)

By now, most observers of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine assume that Russian President Vladimir Putin aims to annex the Donbas region of Ukraine and, possibly, other parts of the country's southeast, which his regime has taken to calling “New Russia.” But that leaves open two questions: First, why didn’t Putin invade Ukraine immediately after he seized Crimea in early March; and second,

why, if he intends to hold the Donbas, would he allow his proxies to shell cities, kill civilians, and destroy mines, plants, schools, and other infrastructure?

In a recent [interview](#) with Marat Gelman, a political commentator for the liberal Russian publication *Novoye Vremya*, Vladimir Lukin, a veteran policymaker who served as Putin's human rights commissioner from February 2004 to March 2014 and who represented Russia in the West's negotiations with Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych and the democratic opposition on February 20, offered some answers.

According to Lukin, the Donbas isn't the goal at all: "No one in the Kremlin needs the Donetsk People's Republic, the Luhansk People's Republic [the self-styled secessionist entities in the Donbas], or New Russia," he said. Indeed, "to win the Donbas and to lose Ukraine would be a defeat for the Kremlin." When pressed further about the purpose of the Kremlin's agitation in the region, Lukin responded that one should "forget the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. The goal is to demonstrate to [Ukrainian President Petro] Poroshenko that he cannot win." Russia, he said, would "introduce as many [troops] as necessary to persuade Poroshenko that he must negotiate with whomever Putin chooses." In his commentary about the interview, Gelman went on to explain that, according to Lukin, both Donetsk and Luhansk will serve "as guarantees of [Ukraine's] nonmembership in NATO." After all, "any referendum on joining any bloc would have to take place in every region, and if only one were against, then the country could not join." The Kremlin's ideal outcome, according to Lukin, is that "everything should go back to as it was under Yanukovych, but without Yanukovych."

When asked how long the violence would continue, Lukin explained, "We're in no hurry. [Poroshenko] is the one who needs to hurry. Or else the girl with the braid" -- former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko -- "will eat him up. Poroshenko's chair is on fire beneath his butt, not ours." But people do not need to continue to die. "It was because of the false certainty of the Ukrainians that they could win that they proceeded so actively with the Anti-Terrorist Operation," Lukin explained. Now, "everyone sees they cannot win" and so "the most militarily active stage has passed."

Lukin's statements make some sense. First, they provide an answer to the question of why Putin didn't seize the opportunity to invade Ukraine earlier in the conflict. The Ukrainian government and army were completely disorganized after the Maidan revolution, and a quick strike could have won Putin Kiev. If Lukin is right, an invasion may never have been in the cards. Instead, Putin may have placed his hopes on the secessionist movements that formed the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics as a way to get him what he wanted at lower cost. When those failed to win a decisive victory and to prevent a Ukrainian rollback, Putin intervened. In the last few days, he seems to have halted and partially reversed the Ukrainian advance.

Second, Lukin's talking points explain the mass destruction. As a result of separatist rule and the ensuing war, several thousand civilians have been killed and wounded, and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes. In addition, industrial production in Donetsk Province has fallen by 29 percent. In Luhansk, it has crashed by 56 percent. Taken together, both provinces have experienced a 46 percent decline in light industry, a 41 percent drop in the chemical industry, a 34 percent crash in machine building, a 22 percent fall in construction materials, a 19 percent decrease in pharmaceutical production, a 13 percent loss in metallurgy, and a 13 percent drop in the coal industry.

If the proxies' goal was to "liberate" the Donbas and its Russian residents, then why destroy the territory and make life impossible for the residents? But if, as Lukin suggests, the goal was to ensure that the Donbas remains within Ukraine to thwart integration with NATO and to provide Russia with leverage over Kiev, then maximal devastation would go a long way toward promoting Russia's political goals. A devastated region would be an economic drain on Kiev's scarce resources and a source of never-ending political instability. It would also invite continued Russian offers of humanitarian aid, particularly for the region's reconstruction, which would enable the Kremlin to continue influencing politics in Ukraine without having to try to swallow the whole country.

Seen in this light, defeating the pro-Russian rebels and the Russian regular forces (estimated to number between 5,000 and 15,000) could be impossible, and accommodating them would be counterproductive. Even if Ukraine liberated the region, as it promises, it will be saddled with a devastated, unstable, and permanently insecure rust belt that will continue to do what it has done since independence in 1991: serve as a channel for Russian influence on Ukraine's internal affairs and a home to political forces -- whether among the separatists or among Yanukovych's formerly dominant Party of Regions -- that oppose reform and integration with the West.

If that is the case, then Kiev's best way out of Putin's trap may be to withdraw from the Donbas territories controlled by Russian troops and separatists. The goal would be to turn them not into autonomous federal units within a weak Ukraine, as Putin desires, but into an independent entity, as he pointedly does not. Having turned the tables on Putin, Kiev could then request Western assistance for enhancing its military's defensive capacities, including building fortifications along its new frontier with Russia and the rump Donbas. Russia and its proxies would then have to clean up the mess they made in the Donbas, Ukraine would be free to pursue integration with the West and the world, and the United States and Europe could breathe a little easier, knowing that the bloodshed had come to an end.

Of course, all this assumes that Lukin really does know Putin's mind and was honest in his exchange with Gelman. There is evidence to support both assumptions. On August 31, Putin [called on Kiev](#) to begin "substantive, content-filled negotiations about the . . . political organization of society and the state in southeastern Ukraine,"

suggesting that the goal of the recent Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine was to lure Kiev into agreeing to some form of federalization for the Donbas. But even if Lukin's account was inaccurate, Kiev would still have to realistically assess its chances of retaking those parts of the Donbas controlled by Russia -- and of trying to rule those territories afterward. If it decides that its chances of success are small and declining, and that the territories would be impossible to manage, formally abandoning the Donbas and attempting to rebuild a Western country may permit Ukraine to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. By the same token, saddling Putin with two economic sinkholes -- Crimea and the Donbas -- could only hasten his regime's decline.

Understandably, Ukrainians -- and especially their ambitious political leaders and courageous volunteer battalions -- will be unwilling to accept such a solution, arguing that soldiers' and civilians' lives weren't sacrificed for the satisfaction of Putin's imperial designs and that calls to withdraw from the Donbas enclave controlled by Russia are tantamount to treason. Morally, they will be right. And Putin, no doubt, is banking on such morally uncompromising views to influence Ukrainian policy as well. Considering the alternatives, however, Ukrainians might be wise to refuse to play the game on his terms and focus only on what is best for them and their country. If they come to believe that the choice is between constant war, a return to things as they were "under Yanukovych, but without Yanukovych," or genuine independence within manageable frontiers, they may decide that abandoning an ungovernable stretch that was always Ukraine's odd man out would actually be a stunning example of Ukraine's commitment to real sovereignty.

And who knows? When Putin eventually exits the political stage and Russia tires of Putinism's misdeeds, the Donbas and perhaps even Crimea may come knocking on Ukraine's door. If they do, Ukraine could readmit them on its own terms, not on the Kremlin's.

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