

Why Ukraine Should Not Withdraw from Donbas

Emil A. Souleimanov

SHARE



October 2014



In his most recent *Foreign Affairs* article, [1] Alexander J. Motyl provocatively explains why Ukraine should withdraw from Donbas, a

contested area in southeastern Ukraine, a portion of which is currently occupied by the Russian army and pro-Russian separatists. According to Motyl, rather than annexation, Russia is interested in the Donbas area remaining a formal part of Ukraine, thereby providing it with an effective tool with which to shape Kyiv's internal and external policies. According to Motyl, relinquishing control over Donbas would alleviate Ukraine of 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 that oppose reform and integration with the West."

Emil A. Souleimanov is an associate professor of Russian and East European Studies at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. His work primarily focuses on security and conflict in the post-Soviet area.

Motyl's argument certainly has its strengths, particularly given that the Kremlin has

thus far demonstrated reluctance to militarily invade southeastern Ukraine and annex the Donbas area in the same way it annexed Crimea. Indeed, losing Crimea and Donbas, Ukraine's historically most pro-Russian and least pro-Ukrainian areas, might paradoxically help to cement the notion of Ukrainian statehood in the rest of the country, thereby helping it to move closer to the West without the risk of inducing internal turmoil. Moreover, the provisions of the OSCE-brokered Minsk contact group's ceasefire agreement[2] containing references to the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces as prospectively autonomous parts of a decentralized Ukraine suggest that Kyiv might have jumped into "Putin's trap." Nevertheless, when analyzed in the context of Moscow's longstanding goals in Ukraine, losing Donbas would not be a solution to the current crisis, kickstarting instead the process of Russia-backed expansion into Ukraine's other provinces. Given the psychological impact of such a territorial loss on Ukrainian society and Western reluctance to provide Ukraine with tangible support in its growing confrontation with Russia, the effects of losing Donbas could be devastating for Ukraine.

Indeed, a withdrawal from Donbas would not stop the territorial expansion of the pro-Russian separatists (or, by extension, of Moscow itself), and would rather encourage further expansion. A strategically located crossroads simultaneously situated deep within the heart of Ukraine and yet beyond Kyiv's control that both enjoys close ties with Russia and depends on it economically and politically, Donbas will likely become a breeding ground for Moscow-orchestrated efforts to destabilize the neighboring areas of southern and eastern Ukraine, with the aim of expanding into them. Donbas, comprised of two provinces, Luhansk and Donetsk, is in fact just a tiny portion of what Russian strategists have recently come to designate as "Novorossia" or "New Russia"—a vast area of southern Ukraine stretching from the Romanian border in the west to the Russian border in the east. It is widely known that a number of Russian ideologists and politicians with close ties to the Kremlin have in recent months openly and consistently laid claim to "New Russia" as a historical part of Russia. Consisting of seven to eight Ukrainian provinces, or roughly one-third of Ukrainian territory, "New Russia" is believed to form an integral part of the "Russian world", another newly

invented construct used to legitimize Moscow's current and potential territorial claims in the post-Soviet space—claims that extend well beyond Ukraine's current borders.

Ukraine's withdrawal from Donbas as a consequence of the Kremlin's failure to impose its will on Kyiv, using Donbas as a tool to block Ukraine's possible NATO and EU accession will be little consolation for Moscow, which is interested in much more than this tiny area. As Motyl and others have acknowledged, Russia's key priority in Ukraine is to control the country as a whole. Stripped of Crimea and Donbas, Ukraine will appear as an increasingly unified country in terms of its pro-Western orientation, which would translate into the ultimate failure of Russia's policy in and toward Ukraine. Moscow therefore needs to either control Kyiv politically or to undermine Ukrainian statehood.

Were Kyiv to withdraw from Donbas—thereby rendering Moscow's strategic goal of controlling the country politically in vein—Moscow would likely nevertheless seek to attain the latter goal, effectively relaunching the “New Russia” project. This is why, and herein lies my primary disagreement with Motyl, a withdrawal from Donbas would be vastly problematic for Ukraine's security, which ultimately trumps any possible benefits resulting from a potential withdrawal. Utilizing its control over Donbas as a strategic outpost, Moscow may use its extensive experience with hybrid or non-linear warfare to destabilize the neighboring areas to the east of Luhansk and Donetsk provinces with the aim of establishing allied separatist “republics” or carrying out provocations in an effort to legitimize incursions into mainland Ukraine from the Donbas area. Over time, these separatist “republics” may declare independence from Kyiv, seeking closer ties with and patronage of Russia. In order to avert prospective Western accusations of further incoherence in Ukraine's internal affairs, Moscow would refrain from annexing the Donetsk and Luhansk “people's republics”, and possibly also other self-styled entities, established within Ukraine's newly occupied provinces. Moscow may or may not recognize their independence formally, but it will certainly provide security guarantees to them the way it has done to Georgia's occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Importantly, a minority of Ukrainians in the country's southern and eastern provinces is still sympathetic to Russia's advances. This crucial minority could be used by Russian-backed separatists as their power base in the country. Ukraine's unwillingness or inability to fight for Donbas, resulting in its de facto withdrawal from the area and thereby relinquishing it to Moscow's control, would be considered a sign of weakness that would only strengthen the impression of Ukraine as a failed state in the minds of some of its citizens.

Lacking natural frontiers and terrain that disables effective guerilla tactics (Ukraine's southeastern provinces are flat and sparsely wooded), the Moscow-backed Donbas separatists may with relative ease push as far westward as the Dnieper River. Moreover, with the central government lacking tangible economic and military support from the West and with separatists backed by regular, though misguided, Russian army units, they would have the potential to threaten Ukraine's central areas as well as Kyiv itself, forcing the central government into further concessions. For purposes of further territorial expansion, control over Donbas is all the more important given the fact that the Crimean peninsula is connected to mainland Ukraine through a narrow strip of land that is much easier to defend.

Another reason why Kyiv should not abandon Donbas is the enormous demoralizing effect that such a move would likely impose on Ukrainian society. A withdrawal from Donbas would dramatically weaken the Ukrainians' key commitment to defending their country against all odds. Ironically, Kyiv's surrender of Crimea without firing a single shot months ago seems to have caused more distress and humiliation to ordinary Ukrainians than the Ukrainian military's recent failures in Donbas caused by the Russian army's direct intervention. Given the Kremlin's far-reaching goals in Ukraine, such demoralization would have devastating consequences for Ukrainians' determination to sacrifice for the sake of defending the rest of their country. Under such dramatic circumstances, the risk of a central government accepting any Moscow-imposed conditions would be much higher than it is currently. Ukraine, as the weaker side of the conflict, may only win a war with Russia by making the cost of war

unbearable for the latter's public opinion; unwilling to resist, Ukrainians would risk losing all chances to defend their statehood.

Facing a military confrontation with its much stronger neighbor, Ukraine has no easy options on the table. In spite of the challenges, abandoning Donbas is neither the best option for the future of Ukrainian territorial integrity and statehood nor for enduring peace. Therefore, the provisions of the Minsk protocol – if they hold – envisaging Ukraine's renewed authority over the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces are to be regarded as the lesser evil.

[1] <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141946/alexander-j-motyl/putins-trap>

[2] <http://www.osce.org/home/123257>

Tags

**ukraine donbas moscow russia russian kyiv provinces
ukrainian area country**