

Ukraine: Vladimir Putin Prefers a “Bad Peace”

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In February, it is a long way to the spring, lamented Joseph Brodsky. Indeed, snow still falls heavily in Moscow and Kiev as well as in the rolling steppes that form Russian-Ukrainian borderlands, but there it is tinted with red. Soldiers are loth to fight in the winter, when life is difficult anyway in these latitudes, but fighting already flared up in war-torn Donbass, and the US prepares to escalate by supplying sophisticated weapons to Kiev.

Tired by the siege and by intermittent shelling, the rebels disregarded snow and took the strategic Donetsk airport. This airport with its Stalin-built tunnels, a symbol of solid Soviet defence work, presented a huge challenge for underequipped militia. Its many-leveled underground facilities were built to sustain a nuclear attack; still, the rebels, after months of fighting, flushed the enemy out and took it.

In a bigger offensive, they trapped Kiev's troops in Debaltsevo pocket, and Kiev already sued for a cease-fire. The rebels hope to dislodge the enemy from their lands altogether; as now they hold only about one third of Donbass; but Russia's president still gropes for brakes. He prefers a bad peace to a good war. For him, the Ukraine is important, but not a *sine qua non*, the only problem in the world. This attitude he shares with the American leader. There is a big difference: Russia wants peaceful Ukraine, Americans prefer one at war.

Russia would prefer to see Ukraine united, federal, peaceful and prosperous. The alternative of splitting Donbass is not very tempting: Donbass is strongly connected to the rest of Ukraine, and it is not easy to switch its ties. The war already had sent millions of refugees from Donbass and from rump Ukraine to Russia and overloaded its systems. Putin can't cut off and forget about Donbass - his people would not allow him anyway. A cautious man, he does not want to go to an open-ended war. So he has to navigate towards some sort of peace.

I had a meeting with a well-informed and highly-placed Russian source who shared with me, for your benefit, some inner thoughts on condition of his anonymity. Though the West is certain that Putin wants to restore the Soviet Union, actually the Russian president did everything he could to save the Ukraine from disintegration, said the source. That's what Russia did in order to bring peace to Ukraine:

Russia supported the West-brokered agreement of February 21, 2014, but the US still pushed for the next day (February 22) coup, or "*had brokered a deal to transition power in Ukraine*" , in [Obama's words](#).

After the coup, the South-East Ukraine did not submit to the new Kiev regime and seceded. Still, Moscow asked the Donbass rebels to refrain from carrying out their May referendum. (They disregarded Putin's appeal).

Moscow recognised the results of sham May elections carried out by Kiev regime after the coup, and recognised Poroshenko as the president of the whole Ukraine – though there were no elections in the South East and opposition parties were banned from participating.

Moscow did not officially recognise the results of November elections in Donbass, to the chagrin of many Russian nationalists.

These steps were quite unpopular in Russian society, but Putin made them to promote a peaceful solution for Ukraine. Some warlike Donbass leaders were convinced to retire. In vain: Putin's actions and intentions were disregarded by the US and EC. They encouraged the 'war party' in Kiev. "They never found a fault with Kiev, whatever they do", said the source.

Peace in Ukraine can be reached through federalisation, my source told me. That's why two most important parameters of Minsk accords (between Kiev and Donetsk) were those we never hear about: constitutional and socio-economic reforms. Russia wants to secure territorial integrity of the Ukraine (minus Crimea) but it can be achieved only through federalisation of Ukraine with a degree of autonomy being given to its regions. Its west and east speak different languages, worship different heroes, have different aspirations. They could manage together, just, if the Ukraine were a federal state, like the US or Switzerland or India.

In Minsk, the sides agreed to establish a joint commission for constitutional reforms, but Kiev regime reneged on it. Instead, they created a small and secretive constitutional committee of the Rada (Parliament). This was condemned by the Venice Commission, a European advisory body on constitutional matters. Donetsk people wouldn't accept it, either, and it is not what was agreed upon in Minsk.

As for integration, it was agreed in Minsk to reintegrate Donbass within Ukraine. This was disappointing for Donbass, but they accepted it, – while Kiev laid siege to Donbass, cut off its banks, ceased buying Donbass coal, stopped to pay pensions. Kiev troops daily shell Donetsk, a city of a million inhabitants (in peaceful times!). Instead of amnesty for rebels, as agreed in Minsk, there are more government troops pouring eastwards.

The Russians did not give up on Minsk accords. The Minsk agreements could bring peace, but they have to be implemented. Perhaps president Poroshenko of Kiev would like to, but Kiev war party with its western support will unseat Poroshenko if he goes too far. Paradoxically, the only way to force him to peace is war, – though Russia would prefer the West to put pressure on its clients in Kiev. The rebels and their Russian supporters used warfare to force him to sign Minsk accords: their offensive on Mariupol on the Black Sea was hugely successful, and Poroshenko preferred to go to Minsk in order to keep Mariupol. Since then, Kiev and Donetsk had a few cease-fires, they exchanged POWs, but Kiev refuses to implement constitutional and socio-economic demands of Minsk accord.

It does not make sense to cease fire, if Kiev uses it to regroup and attack again. Cease fire should lead to a constitutional reform, said my source, a reform negotiated in an open and transparent dialogue of the regions and Kiev. Without a reform, Donbass (or Novorussia) will go to war. So the Debaltsevo operation can be considered as a way to force Poroshenko to sue for peace.

Russia does not intend to take part in the war, or in peace negotiations, said the source. The

Russians are adamant to stay out, while the Americans are equally adamant to present Russia as a side to conflict.

Meanwhile, the Russian-American relations were moved forty years back to Jackson-Vanik amendment of 1974 by the Ukraine Freedom [Support Act of 2014]. The US Secretary of State John Kerry considered this act an unfortunate development, but a temporary one. The Russians are not that optimistic: for them, the Act codified anti-Russian sanctions. The US tries to turn other states against Russia, with some success. In one sweep the German Kanzlerin Angela Merkel eliminated all organisations, structures and ties built between Germany and Russia for many years. Every visit of Joe Biden causes a conflagration.

The Russians are upset with the story of the Malaysian Boeing. In every high-level encounter with the Americans, they remind of the hysterical accusations and claims that the liner was downed by the rebels using Russian missiles. Six months passed since the tragedy; still the Americans did not present a single proof of Russian and/or rebel involvement. They did not present photos of their satellites, nor records of their AWACS aircraft hovering over Eastern Europe. My source told me that the American high-ranking officials do not insist anymore that Russians/rebels are involved, but they stubbornly refuse to apologise for their previous baseless accusations. They never say they are sorry.

Still the Americans want to play the ball. They insist that they do not seek Russian 'surrender', that they find the confrontation costly and unwelcome, while the US needs Russian support for dealing with Iranian nuclear programme, with removal of Syrian chemical weapons, with Palestinian problem. The Russians retort they have heard it all during the Libyan affair and aren't impressed.

Differences of opinion between Russia and the US are big in practically every area. There is one common feature: from Syria to Donbass, Russians endorse peace, Americans push for war. Now the Russians invited some opposition figures and the government representatives from Syria for talks in Moscow. They came, talked, went away and will come again. They could probably settle but the US representatives say that they will never reconcile to Bashar Assad presidency and will fight to the last Syrian for his dismissal. It makes sense for them: every war on the globe supports the US dollar and invigorates Dow Jones, as capital seeks safe haven and finds it in the US.

They do not think about fate of Syrians who flee to Jordan - or of Ukrainians who escape to Russia in ever increasing numbers. What a shame for two wonderful countries! Syria was peaceful and prosperous, the diamond of the Middle East until ruined by the US-supported islamists; the Ukraine was the wealthiest part of the USSR, until being ruined by the US-supported far-right and oligarchs. Joseph Brodsky bitterly predicted in 1994, as the Ukraine declared its independence from Russia, that the shifty Ukrainians will evoke their Russian poetry in their mortal hour. This prophesy is about to be fulfilled.

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