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Ukraine: The Violent Contraries

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*Do we ever get what we really want?
Do we ever achieve what our powers
have ostensibly equipped us for? No:
everything works by contraries.*

*Nikolai Gogol
"Diary of a Madman and Other
Stories"*

*What does it think it's doing running
west*

*When all the other country brooks
flow east*

*To reach the ocean? It must be the
brook*

Can trust itself to go by contraries.

*Robert Frost
"West Running Brook"*

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What, indeed, Russia must wonder, must Ukraine think it's doing, running west, not east?

A fortnight ago, someone fired a Grad rocket — the name means "hail" — in the direction of a government checkpoint northeast of Volnovakha in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk region. The rocket missed the checkpoint, but struck a civilian passenger bus that was traveling

north from Zlatoustovka to Donetsk, killing twelve and wounding thirteen. And there, all agreement as to the facts ends.

The Ukrainian government claims pro-Russian separatists in Dokuchayevsk, a town northeast of the checkpoint, fired the rocket. Armed irregulars of the separatist Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) quickly claimed credit for destroying "an Ukry checkpoint" later disputing that a rocket hit the bus. They blamed automatic weapons fire; then later that day, a false flag attack by Banderovtsi from "rogue" elements of the Ukraine Interior Ministry's Sich Battalion.[1] Two days later, the Donetsk News Agency claimed the bus detonated an anti-personnel mine planted at the checkpoint by Ukrainian troops. Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) quickly determined that a Grad rocket struck close to the passenger bus, though the OSCE's Russian representative highlighted the team's assessment that the rocket was fired, contrary to Ukrainian claims, from a north or northeastern direction.[2] On 22 January, a streetcar in the center of Donetsk was hit by mortar fire, killing 13 persons. DPR defense minister Vladimir Kononov announced, "A covert group operating in the area was arrested," elaborated by a DPR security ministry spokesperson as, "The self-defense forces arrested a covert group of Ukrainian security forces not far from the scene."

What is the purpose of this narrative, one might ask, beyond proving the maxim that truth is the first casualty of war? It is to put the question: what do the parties to this conflict really want? The separatist DPR wanted a pretense to breach the Minsk armistice agreement and go on the offensive. What it got was a provocation gone awry — the Grad rocket attack on the Volnovakha checkpoint that instead hit a passenger bus — and a counterfeit "Ukrainian" response — the mortar attack on civilians in Donetsk. The separatist DPR disposed of an inconvenient truth — Ukrainian armed forces in the area were deployed well outside mortar range of Donetsk — by blaming "rogue" Sich Battalion elements. The later Grad attack on Mariupol was cynically instrumental, attempting to provoke a civilian exodus to impede the movement of Ukrainian armed forces, potentially trapping several thousand defenders in the city. The separatist endgame is to dictate favorable armistice terms, including the termination of "anti-terrorist operations" in eastern Ukraine and the imposition of a federal structure that grants substantial autonomy to Ukraine's regions, something many analysts believe would bring down President Poroshenko's government.

So, to the question What do the separatists want?, here is their imagined map of a post-armistice Ukraine:

It depicts a view of so-called "federal Ukraine" in which the nation is reduced to a near rump state. The pro-Russian "Novorossian Territories" (red) extend west from the separatist strongholds of Donetsk and Lugansk to claim the eastern third of the country. An arc separating the nine-region Novorossiia extends southwest from Kharkiv through Dnipropetrovsk and Odessa to Ukraine's border with Moldova (and its own pro-Russian separatist province, Transdnistria). In southwestern Ukraine, Zakarpattia with its sizeable ethnic Hungarian and Rus minorities is an "Autonomous Colony" (green) along with a three-region bloc in north central Ukraine covering Cherviv, Surny and Poltava. Galician "Ukraine" (dark blue) and "Malorossia" Ukraine (light blue) comprise the core of the rump state.

The separatists' imagined geopolitical reshaping of Ukraine is encapsulated in their choice of the word Malorossia ("Little Russia") or properly, Malorossiia. The triune Russian nation—



Velikorossiya ("Great Russia"), Ukrainian Malorossiya, and Ruthenian Belorussiya ("White Russia") — was a defining principle of the Russian imperial credo. On the other hand, the ethnonym Ukraine denotes a distinctive historical status, not derived from Russia but from its own culture, religion and language. The Ukrainian national identity that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries deconstructed Velykorosiya of the triune Russian nation and left the unadorned Rosiya as its remainder.

In Natal'ya Ivanova's elegant phrase, Ukraine today is "a knight at the crossroads: Ukraine or Malorossiya?" For her, the choice of Ukraine reduces to the principle "anything rather than with Russia."^[3] The principle at the heart of the Malorossiya pathway is the reunion of Eurasia's Slavic core, a center of gravity sufficiently forceful to banish Western (read: American) hegemony from Eurasian geography. It is small wonder that many central and eastern Europeans fear a political solution in Ukraine based on "spheres of influence, a new Yalta," as Hungarian parliamentarian Zsolt Németh put it.

And what of Ukraine's government? The evacuation of the remaining "cyborg" elements from the ruined Donetsk airport — the remnant of Ukrainian soldiers and Azov Battalion irregulars who endured a siege longer than Moscow or Stalingrad — dealt Ukraine a huge psychological blow. Further sanctions will do little for the teetering reputation of Ukraine's military and political leadership: the comment is frequently heard in Ukraine that after the tragedy of Mariupol, all that was heard were statements about the need to strengthen economic pressure on Russia. In words attributed to an Azov Battalion commander,

"This war cannot be a war of generals and politicians. They already lost their war. This is a war of an armed people. Here, at the front, there are plenty of weapons and plenty of determination. We need men, fighters, volunteers. We need everyone for whom Ukraine and its will to survive are real things for which one is willing to die."^[4]

The Russian-backed separatist forces have maintained a consistent target set through the fall

and winter campaign in eastern Ukraine: the Donetsk airport, the Debaltseve salient, and Mariupol. The separatists' objective is to capture these targets and preempt the expected Ukrainian summer offensive. The Donetsk airport today is indisputably in separatist hands. Ukraine's position in the Debaltseve salient — a critical rail and road hub connecting Donetsk and Lugansk — has suddenly gone critical with what the Ukrainian national security council claims is a 9000-man Russian surge into the battlespace, the objective of which is to push Ukrainian forces beyond artillery range of Donetsk and Debaltseve. It would seem simple for Ukraine to demonstrate to the world Russia's direct participation in the war: as one Ukrainian journalist despaired, "it seems the Ukrainian army has a secret order either not to capture Russian soldiers, or in any case, not to advertise their capture."

If separatist and Russian forces can deploy sufficient numbers north of the Debaltseve salient toward Artemiv'sk, the result may be to trap the Ukrainian force in the salient, with disastrous consequences. And, as discussed, the siege of the strategic seaport of Mariupol appears to be underway.

As I described in an earlier essay, Russia and the separatists seek to establish an arc that extends from Kharkiv on northeastern Ukraine's border with Russia to Odessa on the Black Sea — encompassing the area shown in red on the map above. For Ukraine, the sweep of that arc is further east, from Kharkiv south through Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhya along the north-south highway E105, which continues south to Crimea. The separatists' next target may be Dnipropetrovsk, which on 25 January imposed a so-called "special security regime" after the collapse of Ukrainian units farther east. Just five days earlier, Ukraine launched its fourth-round military mobilization (reportedly to some resistance) to replenish its severely depleted army and national guard reserves before the expected summer offensive.

And what, finally, does the Russian government want? While the West's response has been to ratchet up sanctions against Russia, "the main problem," as Russian journalist Ilya Milstein wrote ten months ago, "is not that the price for Crimea is high. The main problem lies in the fact that the price is unknown."^[5] And to the main question posed by a classic of Soviet literature — What do you want? — President Putin seems not to know. He may, as Alexander Motyl wrote some months ago, have maneuvered himself, and Russia, into a position of *Zugzwang* — a condition in chess in which any possible move only worsens the player's position.^[6]

Perhaps as important, Putin and the nationalists to his right find it unthinkable that Russia should suffer punitive sanctions like, in Milstein's words, "some Milosevic, Saddam or Gaddafi." Sanctions in the short term may have averted (though we may be witnessing the demise of sanctions as an effective *Force de dissuasion*) large-scale, overt armed intervention by Russian forces. The alternative, however, has been Ukraine's slow strangulation. The sanctions regime also disregards the fact — incomprehensible though it may seem — that Russian chauvinists see President Putin as pathologically inclined to compromise. There is, we should remain mindful, always something worse.

Russia (and most Ukrainians) seem convinced the United States and its allies will not resort to direct military force to defend Ukraine: sanctions notwithstanding, Putin's Russia is, after all, no Yugoslavia, Iraq or Libya. In Russia's view, the demand for Russian natural gas will trump western Europe's appetite for sanctions, especially if Russia as rumored is entertaining asymmetric economic responses of its own, like the use of gold as a monetary asset.

Since the onset of conflict in eastern Ukraine, which began as a local war of occupation, none of the parties — none — were willing to accede to the rules that governed the Cold War. The consequence has been to turn the conflict in eastern Ukraine into a disaster, the scale of which is difficult to predict. While suggesting no equivalency in their positions or standing in the conflict, the United States and Russia seem to share one thing in common: each in its own way seems at a loss as to what it wants, and that for the people of eastern Ukraine that may be the most terrible thing.

Ukraine today is a place of contraries and oxymora. Edmund Wilson once wrote that "the more violent the contraries, the greater the works of art." In art or literature, perhaps, but for the people of Ukraine, it is the greater the tragedy.

[1] The "Sich Battalion" was formed in June 2014 from Svoboda (a Ukrainian nationalist party) volunteers.

[2] In reality, a Ukrainian Interior Ministry official for the Donetsk region stated within an hour of the rocket attack that it was launched from a town north-northeast of Volnovakha. Dokuchayevsk is located about 31km north-northeast of Volnovakha.

[3] Natal'ya Ivanova (2012). "A Knight at the Crossroads': Ukraine or Malorossiya?" InfoRos.ru [online English edition, 28 August 2012]. <http://inforos.ru/en/?module=news&action=view&id=31585>. Last accessed 29 January 2015.

[4] "Комбат «Азова»: Запад не помог, война проиграна, ситуация на фронте критическая" ("Battalion commander 'Azov': The West has not helped, the war is lost, the situation at the front is critical"). Антифашист [online Russian edition, 26 January 2015]. <http://antifashist.com/item/kombat-azova-zapad-ne-pomog-vojna-proigrana-....> Last accessed 29 January 2015.

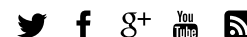
[5] Ilya Milstein (2014). "Долгая яма." Грани.Ру [online Russian edition, 17 December 2014]. <http://grani.ru/opinion/milshtein/m.236025.html>. Last accessed 29 January 2015.

[6] Alexander J. Motyl (2014). "Putin's Zugzwang: The Russia-Ukraine Standoff." World Affairs Journal [online edition, July/August 2014]. <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/putin's-zugzwang-russia-ukraine-standoff>. Last accessed 29 January 2015.

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