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[Who is the current proponent of Moscow's policy in Ukraine?](#)



Kyiv has been discussing the Cross Procession organized by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) for a week already. The march commenced July 3, and faithful from different cities are scheduled to reach Kyiv July 27. According to organizers, the main idea behind the event is to “pray for peace in Ukraine”. However, many are displeased with this explanation and so the Cross Procession attracts the attention of both social activists and law enforcement officers.

The fact of the matter is that the UOC MP has been in a rather ambiguous situation for the last two years. It refrains from commenting on the annexation of Crimea or the war in the Donbas. Moreover, the head of the UOC MP Metropolitan Onuphrius refused to rise to his feet last year when names of the soldiers awarded the title of “Hero of Ukraine” were being read out in Ukrainian parliament. All this along with the formal subordination of the UOC MP to the Russian Orthodox Church has led to a discussion about who the current proponents of Moscow's policy in Ukraine are. This discussion is a legitimate one.

Soft power and hard power

Russia used traditional methods to influence Ukrainian politics between 1991 and 2013. Russian economic interests were secondary to its own political interests: Russia used gas prices as a means of pressure; introduced embargos on imports of a number of Ukrainian goods; and opened and closed borders for bilateral trade. Consequently, Kyiv authorities were often forced to focus on the pursuit of economic interests, sacrificing political policies in turn. Every prime minister flew regularly to take part in negotiations in the Kremlin in order to try and squeeze out concessions on gas and with respect to a common market.

Moreover, Moscow supported those Ukrainian political parties which fed on pro-Soviet nostalgia. Social democrats, communists, or the Party of Regions – Moscow diversified risks and “suckled” various politicians. But all of them had one thing in common: support for the idea of Eurasian integration and Ukraine's joining of the Customs Union and CSTO formed part of their program. They also campaigned against Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO and the European Union.

All of this became impossible in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of the Donbas. Public pro-Russian discourse ultimately became compromised in Ukraine. The idea of Eurasian integration has become unthinkable given Moscow's aggression towards Ukraine. The number of supporters of Ukraine's accession to NATO (46%) has exceeded the number of opponents (38%) for the first time since 1991, although an overwhelming majority of the country's population recently rejected any idea of rapprochement with the North-Atlantic Alliance.

Moscow has lost its former levers of pressure: no talk of a “multi-vector approach”, “turn back to the East” or “restoration of bilateral relations” is possible whilst its war in Ukraine rages on. However, this does not mean that the Kremlin has given up on its attempts to influence Ukrainian politics - only the means by which it attempts to manage the sentiments of the Ukrainian man in the street have changed.

Opposing interpretations of the Minsk agreements

The war in the Donbas has entered a grueling phase of mutual exhaustion. There are no full-scale military operations, only shelling along the front line continues on a daily basis. New lists of soldiers and officers killed in Donbas are published in Ukrainian media daily. At the same time, the Minsk agreements alone are not sufficient to bring about peace. They were not drawn up with lasting peace in mind but rather with the objective of arriving at a truce. Neither was an exact timeframe for fulfillment of specific stipulations, nor defined penalties for failure to implement them, set out. Moreover, the order in which the stipulations of these agreements are implemented will determine precisely who emerges victorious from this war.

Moscow demands that Kyiv grants amnesty to militants in the first instance before an election is organized on the occupied territory (amnestied militants could participate) and only then will the Kremlin be inclined to discuss the handover of control of the Russian-Ukrainian stretch of the border. In fact, this equates to full legalization of pro-Russian militants - and it is precisely they who are to take control of the border between the two states. As a result, Moscow wants to force Kyiv to take on economic responsibility for occupied territories while the Kremlin exerts political influence on Donetsk and Luhansk. Thus, the Kremlin hopes to halt Ukraine's drift towards the West by turning the country into a non-integral state divided by internal conflicts.

In contrast, Kyiv believes that the sequential order of the implementation of the terms of the Minsk agreements should be different. First of all, control over the border should be handed over to the Ukrainian army which will render the supply of arms and ammunition to militants impossible and only then can elections in Donbas take place. Additionally, Kyiv states elections should be held in accordance with Ukrainian law and with participation of Ukrainian political parties.

No compromise is possible given such circumstances simply because the order of execution of the terms of the Minsk agreements will cause the curtain to fall on this war. And the matter of who the winner of this confrontation is to be - Kyiv or Moscow - is at stake.

Useful idiots

The only chance Moscow stands of winning this war is by prompting an internal unbalance in Ukraine. The economic crisis and the devaluation of the hryvnia have brought about a deterioration in living standards which has led to social discontent. Poverty is the most fertile soil for populism; a number of politicians in Ukraine feed on citizen's belief in instantaneous changes for the better. The only problem lies in the fact that their proposals for change are doomed to fail.

Western financial support is currently critical to Ukraine's macro-economic stability. That being said, the IMF is inclined to lend only subject to Ukraine's adherence to points listed on a clearly defined action plan. One of the items on the agenda should be the establishment of market rates for housing and public utilities. A number of Ukrainian politicians have begun to exploit the idea of lowering tariffs following the fulfillment of the abovementioned requirement by the present Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers. However, they do not want to discuss the consequences of a move such as, for example, termination of international lending to Ukraine.

Moreover, a number of populists feed on the idea of the ineffectiveness of the Minsk agreements. They suggest the agreements should be violated and that a military offensive on the militants' positions should begin. The fact that, in this case, Moscow would be justified in accusing Ukraine of violating the agreements and demanding that the sanctions on Russia be lifted does not seem to bother them. Taking into account that Russian troops confront the Ukrainian army in Donbas, any blitzkrieg is seen as impossible. On the contrary, it would convince the international community that Kyiv is incapable of keeping its part of the bargain.

Moscow's third method of exerting pressure on Kyiv involves giving a voice to those who demand abstract peace. And there is an important nuance here: given the fact that Russia is playing the role of the aggressor, any anti-war march will be held in Moscow under the slogan "no to war with Ukraine" and any corresponding rally in Kyiv will become an unofficial call for "an end to the defense of Ukraine".

Peace in Ukraine will not be abstract after all; it can be achieved only through concessions. In the case of concessions made on both sides, we will be left with a compromise. In the case of unilateral concessions, the said peace, quite rightly, will be labeled a capitulation.

A wager on stupidity

Pro-Russian discourse has fundamentally changed in Ukraine. Politicians who pursue the pro-Kremlin agenda do not need to talk about Kyiv's rapprochement with Moscow. They just offer simple solutions to complex problems instead. They can tear Ukraine down in the case of their successful implementation.

For example, they can suggest steps which will eventually erode confidence in Ukraine on behalf of Western partners. They may criticize the Minsk agreements and demand an immediate military attack on militants' positions. They may insist on the speedy conduct of an early parliamentary election since a lot of populists and former fellow party members of the ex-president Victor Yanukovich will be represented in the next parliament according to sociological research. The position that "Ukraine needs peace at any price" will form part of these initiatives since, in fact, this would effectively constitute a public acceptance of capitulation.

The peculiarity of the situation lies in the fact that those who pursue this agenda are not necessarily sustained by Moscow. On the contrary, the Kremlin sees it as sufficient to place a wager on the so-called "useful idiots". These "useful idiots" are those Ukrainian politicians and public figures who, through sheer folly, are eager to trade the future of Ukraine for their own career advancement or political ambitions. They may be genuinely pro-Ukrainian and sincere when it comes to their belief in the feasibility of their plans for the country, but these plans are likely to bury the Ukrainian state much faster than Russian shells could.

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