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The Crisis in Ukraine: Possibilities of Further Escalation and Effects on Hungary

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Chances of Separatism in Eastern and Southern Ukraine

In the short run one does not need to expect the emergence of similar separatist movements in Eastern and Southern Ukraine like the one in the Crimea. First and foremost, the background is different. The Eastern and Southern territories were never separated from Ukraine like the Crimea was; the peninsula was detached from the Russian Federation only in 1954 and attached to Ukraine. Besides, the Eastern and Southern territories also lack any institutions of autonomy (such as the parliament in the Crimea). In addition to these, the population of these regions is much more Sovietized, thus politically passive than the Russian-speaking majority of the Crimea, which was easy to mobilize. Events of the Euromaidan induced only passive reactions from the Donbass region: even in large cities, such as Donetsk or Kharkhiv only minor pro-Russian demonstrations were held with a few thousand (probably imported) participants. There were no massive, large, pro-Moscow rallies at all. Besides, the way how Moscow used its military might to hastily organize the referendum (not recognized by practically anybody in the international arena) in the Crimea may show that the support of joining Russia was not even firm on the peninsula either.

One shall not forget about the role of oligarchs either. Most of Ukraine's oligarchic elite, including the strongest player Rinat Akhmetov are in favor of preserving the country's territorial integrity. Two powerful businessmen, Ihor Kolomoyskiy and Sergey Taruta even

agreed to become governors in Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk, respectively. The involvement of the oligarchs is an important factor that indeed needs to be calculated with.

„While in the Crimea Moscow count on the surprise factor (the new Ukrainian leadership was just set up following the February turn, the West concentrated on Kyiv, and the command of the armed forces was disorganized), this already cannot play any role in Eastern and Southern Ukraine.

László Póti

Second, in Eastern and Southern Ukraine the interests and means of Russia significantly differ from the ones in the Crimea. While In the Crimean case Russia had a clear, visible military interest, namely the preservation of the Black Sea Fleet bases despite the regime change in Kyiv, in Eastern and Southern Ukraine no such concrete defense-related interest can be named. In theory, the defense industry of the Donbass region could play such a role however, those companies are anyways closely interconnected with their Russian

partners, hence there is no need for such a physical takeover that happened in the Crimea.

Besides, both the Kyiv leadership and the outside world had enough time to prepare for the possibility of a Russian aggression and make the steps necessary. The West made it very clear to Russia that in case of any further military advance it has to calculate with much more serious sanctions.

All in all, in the short term Moscow will probably aim at stabilizing its new conquest instead of further escalating the conflict with Kyiv and the West. The earlier non-recognition policy of Moscow (e.g. that they considered the Yatseniuk government to be illegitimate) is changing as well, as indicated by the recent meeting of the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine.

However, in the medium term one still cannot fully exclude that separatist tendencies may become stronger in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. The main reasons behind are the already well predictable economic and functional hardships of the Ukrainian government. The effects of these problems on the Ukrainian population may well get exaggerated and utilized by Russia, partly through its strong media presence, and partly by further strengthening the pro-Russian ‘civil society’ organizations that already proved to be very useful in the Crimea.

„The ideological background, the existence of the Crimean precedent, the supposedly active support from Moscow, the foreseeable social problems and the massive fear of them together with the probable inefficiency of the Kyiv central government constitute a dangerous mix. This is indeed a chance for the local separatisms that are likely to increase in the future.“

András Deák

Towards a Federal Ukraine?

The interviewed experts had different opinions about the chances of a future federalization. According to László Póti, the elites of such a young nation state are not interested in any kind of federalization, as it would weaken the statehood of their own country. Besides, with the annexation of the Crimea Moscow has actually weakened the chances of federalization, as the particular region of Ukraine was not kept inside the country. The peninsula could have served both as a reference point and as an engine of the federalization.

Contrary to this, András Deák thinks that federalization is actually a must, and it is a step that Kyiv cannot avoid. The appointments of the two oligarchs (Taruta to Donetsk, and Kolomoyskiy to Dnipropetrovsk) to governors demonstrates that the new Kyiv government has only very narrow support in the regions; and it cannot choose such leaders, who are both loyal to the centre and accepted by the regional elites, thus has to rely on the oligarchs. If a process cannot be stopped, one has to lead it, and this is true also for Kyiv and the federalization. In the current fragile situation only the transfer of power to the regions may mean institutionalized guarantees of stability for the regional elites. This argument is well

supported by the statements of Prime Minister Yatseniuk about the need to decentralize the state and to give more power to the regions. Hence, federalization may be perceived also as a form of compromise between the central government and the regional elites. It is only a formality, whether this process will be also officially named federalization, or the regions will just receive more power without any ceremonial declarations and constitutional debates.

In the latter case Russia may strengthen its cooperation with those local elites, who are loyal to Kyiv, but also open for a discussion with Moscow. This way Russia could receive lasting, constitutional guarantees for preserving its influence over Ukraine. The other, separatist scenario would require Russia to replace the current elite in Southern and Eastern Ukraine. Russia is disappointed with the local elite, because they have supported Kyiv in the critical days of February. Hence,

the annexation of the Crimea and the changes in property rights can also be perceived as a message to the local elites of the South and East. All in all, an officially federalized Ukraine is more favorable for the pro-Russian, occasionally separatist political forces, as it is easier for them to build up themselves.

„For Moscow the federalization may mean both a „civilized divorce“ and also a new way to preserve its influence over Ukraine. The difference between the two is that who are going to be the Ukrainian partners.”

András Deák

András Rácz stressed that a lot depends on the concrete details of a possible federalization, such as how many components the federation would have, and how the federal decision-making would be structured. He reminded that in 2003 in Moldova Russia proposed such a settlement plan (the so-called Kozak Memorandum) that would have given a de facto veto right to the separatist region of Transnistria in all important questions of governance through its overrepresentation in the federal decision-making.

Most probably Moscow would follow a similar pattern in Ukraine, thus would strive for guaranteeing at least blocking minority powers for the Southern and Eastern regions of Ukraine in foreign, security and defense policy questions. Hence, through the federalization Russia could secure institutionalized guarantees for preserving the neutrality of Ukraine. It is true that with the annexation of the Crimea the possible number of pro-Russian federative subjects have been decreased in Ukraine. However, this does not mean the Moscow could not push still for getting at least blocking minority powers for the pro-Russian regions of the remaining Ukraine in questions of federal decision-making.

Effects of the Crimea Crisis on Hungarian Foreign Policy

It is already clear that the Crimean events – or according to András Rácz: the Crimean Non-War – mean a turning point in the post-bipolar system of international relations. The role of Russia is going to increase in international politics, and both the United States and the European countries will have to reconsider their relations with Moscow. However, it is an exaggeration to speak about a new Cold War, as there are no opposing military blocks

present, the conflicts are not of global scale, and the ultimate stake is not a nuclear war. Still, according to László Póti one can expect a cool-down in the relations between the West and Russia moreover, Russia-related concerns are likely to become stronger even in the CIS region, as well as in China. The role of military power will also change: the importance of territorial defense is going to grow again, therefore defense-focused approaches to security policy are likely to regain their former importance.

Hungarian foreign policy will also need to adapt to these changed circumstances. The main question is whether Budapest is going to be a winner or a loser of this process. According to András Deák it is already visible that maintaining the simplified, business-oriented Russia-policies of the former Hungarian governments (e.g. the governments of Orbán and Gyurcsány) would have exceptionally high political costs. It is even questionable, whether the emblematic projects of Hungarian-Russian relations (the South Stream and the extension of Paks) could be continued at all. If Budapest strives for keeping up these projects, detailed political planning and high flexibility are to become of absolute necessity. However, due to the rapidly changing situation, Hungary would anyways need to conduct a thorough political cost-benefit analysis to re-evaluate its Russia-policy.

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