

UKRAINE - A FROZEN CONFLICT?

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After Ukraine's recent parliamentary elections, which allowed the formation of a pro-European government, the rebel-controlled areas in Eastern Ukraine responded by holding their own elections in the so-called Peoples Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, despite strong opposition from Kyiv and the West who officially refused to recognize the results of those polls. Thought as a sign of expressing their independent statehood, the ballots were supposed to offer legitimacy to the rebel separatist leadership in the regions they control. The United States and the European Union consider the recent elections in Eastern rebel areas of Ukraine as "*illegitimate*" and a strong violation of the Minsk agreement signed on September 5th which was imposed a ceasefire.

Even before the elections, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko accused the ballot as "*pseudo-elections...made by terrorists and bandits*" and the Security Service of Ukraine stated the intention of launching a criminal investigation into what they have called a "*power grab*" in eastern separatist regions. It is important to mention the order Petro Poroshenko gave the Parliament of revoking the special key concession made in September when he signed the Minsk Agreement thus cancelling the so-called special status law which offered broad powers of autonomy to the eastern separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Even if it is true that accepting that concession was extremely important to slow the fighting in the last months, the Ukrainian leadership now wants to create a new law in order to clearly define the border of these separatist regions and to stop all support from the central Ukrainian government. It is essential to see if Poroshenko's decision of letting the separatist regions self-fund will translate into a submission of the rebels who may then want to come to the negotiation table in an effort to bring back a certain state of stability in eastern Ukraine. The tensions in the East and the continuous support of the Russian Federation for the rebel fighters, despite Moscow's official denial, will probably lead to a different scenario, in which the rebels, perceiving Poroshenko's law proposal as a recognition of their power, will continue their fight in other regions of the country, trying to further destabilize the central Kyiv government in order to obtain more influence. What Igor Plotniskiy, the newly elected head of the self proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic recently stated, "*the war is not over yet and LPR strongly desires maximal integration with Russia*", can and should be perceived as a warning signal for the Ukrainian government and also for the Western community that the conflict that has devastated the country in the last year will not be over soon.

Samantha Power the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, stated that the US supports Kyiv's view and it will not recognize any election in the separatist areas that does not respect the Ukrainian law and does not have the full consent of the central Ukrainian government. U.S State Department warned the Russian Federation against recognizing the illegitimate vote in eastern separatist regions, stating that if Moscow decides to ignore its commitments to respect Ukraine's electoral law and if it will continue with its dangerous and destabilizing actions, "*the costs to Russia will rise*". Serious concerns regarding the illegitimate and illegal elections in eastern Ukraine were also raised by National Security Council spokeswoman, Bernadette Meehan who warned Russia since November 2nd against using "*such illegitimate vote as a pretext to insert additional troops and military equipment into Ukraine*". Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov stated, using an extremely careful language, that because the elections in Donetsk and Lugansk were in general held in an organized manner, with a high voter turnout, Russia respects "*the will expression of the citizens of*

the southeast". Yuri Ushakov, Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign affairs adviser emphasized that the fact that Moscow "*respects*" the results of the elections in the separatist regions doesn't amount to its recognition, continuing to express Russia's commitment to the peace talks.

The shelling of Mariupol, an important city in eastern Ukraine resumed at the end of October and the constant bombing of the pro-Russian rebels determined the people to fear that an invasion could happen any time. The ceasefire imposed by the Minsk Agreement is now basically seen as an illusion and both the Ukrainian security forces and the pro-Russian rebels have mobilized troops and weapons in what it seems like another round of vicious fighting. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko told the Ukrainian people that it will continue the intensive reinforcement in Mariupol, building lines of fortifications and receiving "*modern offensive and reconnaissance weapons*" from the Ukrainian military. Since August, NATO officials observed an important number of Russian troops at the Ukrainian border and U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, the supreme commander of NATO forces in Europe stated that the border between Russia and Ukraine "*has become completely porous, allowing Russian troops and weapons to pass freely into the rebel territory with reinforcements*". In the last months the Ukrainian border region witnessed a continued presence of significantly capable and ready Russian battalion tactical groups and they emphasized the potential for significant reinforcement of the pro-Russian separatists.

In this context, on November 7th, Ukraine accused Russia of sending dozens of tanks and other heavy weapons into rebel-controlled eastern regions and said five servicemen were killed in clashes with rebels. Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council spokesman Andriy Lysenko said at least 32 tanks, 16 artillery systems and 30 trucks loaded with fighters and ammunition had crossed into eastern Ukraine from Russia. A NATO military officer stated that the North Atlantic Alliance has indeed witnessed an increase in Russian troops and equipment along the border of Ukraine, but it had no immediate confirmation on the latest Ukrainian report. If the crossing of Russian troops in Ukraine is confirmed, then that would represent further evidence of Moscow's aggression and direct involvement in destabilizing Ukraine and thus will reveal its blatant violation of the Minsk Agreement and of its true commitment to the ceasefire which specifically stated the pullback of heavy weaponry. "*Deep concern*" regarding the reports of Russian troops movement in Ukraine were expressed by Angela Merkel who was informed by Petro Poroshenko that the truce signed on Sept. 5th is constantly being violated, with another humanitarian convoy being sent by Russia in the rebel-controlled areas in eastern Ukraine, without prior inspection by Ukrainian border officials.

The official reaction of Kremlin was that of a strong denial of such Russian actions in the Ukrainian territory, accusing these reports as unfounded rumours in social networks and more important, "*provocative*", aimed at further fuelling the ongoing tensions. Sergey Lavrov said that there are no Russian troops in eastern Ukraine, adding, that "*Even Jen Psaki said that the State Department doesn't have the information about this; If Psaki doesn't have it, I don't.*" Even if Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with his American counterpart, John Kerry in Beijing at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and Lavrov stated that "*we believe it necessary to complete as soon as possible the settlement of the disengagement line so that the ceasefire and terms of the armistice could be monitored,*" he underlined that the Ukrainian government is still to implement the Minsk and the Geneva Agreements and to hold constitutional reforms in order to address the grievances of its separatist provinces and admitted that this task is still relevant and even probably more acute than in April.

What`s next for Ukraine?

Russia`s relations with the West have reached the last months, the lowest point since the Cold War Era, after Moscow`s blatant violation of the international law, the annexation of Crimea and its support for the separatist movements in eastern Ukraine. As a result, the United States and the European Union started imposing tough economic sanctions on Kremlin, with extremely negative effects on the Russian rouble. Some analysts suggest that the conflict is moving toward the same type of open warfare that broke out after the February ouster of Russian-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovici and after Moscow`s Crimea annexation.

It is important to analyze the prospects of a new resurgence of violence in the Eastern regions of Ukraine and if the Ukrainian reports are proved accurate, then the Russian actions of supporting the rebels will only lead to more fragility and in the end to a stronger destabilization of the entire region. The ceasefire imposed by the Minsk Agreement may breakdown if the pro-Russian separatist groups will decide to continue direct military confrontation of the Ukrainian security forces and it will take a responsible attitude from all sides involved in this tragic conflict in order to bring upon a certain state of stability. Conflict escalation is an extremely probable scenario in eastern Ukraine if it will be proven that Moscow has indeed sent military support across the Ukrainian border, thus illustrating its continuous aggression and lack of regard toward the international agreements it has signed. By deploying its military troops closer to Ukraine and even entering Ukraine`s territory, Russia is sending a message: it still represents a great power that has the ability to follow its national interests, of expanding its influence in the ex-soviet states, even if this means directly offering its military support to separatist groups in eastern Ukraine.

Sergey Lavrov reiterated Moscow`s belief that because the Minsk Agreement and the ceasefire was signed between the Ukrainian government and the rebel militias, these are the two main actors who have the task of working to achieve stable security environment. *“We have now realistically entered the phase of a ‘frozen conflict’* Yury Yakimenko a political analyst at Ukraine`s Razumkov political research centre told Reuters, referring to the classic situation of ex-Soviet Republics where separatist were supported by Russian forces.

The depth of the rift between Moscow and the West, reminiscent of the Cold War Era has been very often publicly stated in the last half of the year and the conflict between Russia and the Western Community will certainly continue on the long term and this has been explicitly supported by Vladimir Putin`s strong criticism of the United States way of action. He stated that the reality is that the US is endangering global security because it is imposing a *“unilateral diktat”* on the rest of the world. Russia will not admit that it helped the rebels fighting in Eastern Ukraine against the central Kyiv government because doing so means it admits its desire to rebuild the Soviet Empire at the expense of its neighbours and with blatant and conscious violations of the international law that represent the foundation of the whole international system. Vladimir Putin asserts that Western sanctions will not have an important effect on Russia because his country is self-sufficient. But at a more critical analysis of the Russian economy it can be stated that the sanction packages introduced by the Western community affected in a rather significant manner the Russian economy and especially its currency, the rouble, and that may have a negative impact on the long term.

Mikhail Gorbachev admitted that the recent tensions between US and Russia regarding Ukraine *“have put the world on the brink of a new Cold War”*. It is necessary that in the current regional context, fuelled by Russian military concentrated at Ukraine`s border, sporadic military conflict between the separatist groups and the Ukrainian security forces, the Ukrainian government continues its cooperation with the European Union. Ukraine needs external financial and political aid to survive the difficult obstacles it`s confronted with, but this aid will definitely depend on the government`s ability to implement efficient internal reforms.