
BEWARE APPEASEMENT WITH RUSSIA

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Ukraine faces troubling times. Violence continues in the contested Donetsk and Luhansk regions along its border with Russia, despite the shaky ceasefire and peace agreement known as Minsk II. Those areas, known collectively as Donbass, continue to experience fighting against Russian-backed separatist rebels.

The head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which oversees the implementation of the peace deal, said earlier this year the situation had reached an all-time low, and expressed concerns that remain over the continually delayed local elections in Donbass. Now, the OSCE is considering arming its observers to protect themselves as they patrol these increasingly dangerous regions.

Meanwhile in Kiev, President Petro Poroshenko, the former business magnate, faces his own round of criticisms, centered on claims that he has not followed through on the promises that got him elected after the 2014 revolution of reforming the corrupt practices of his predecessor Viktor Yanukovich, particularly that he has elevated close associates to positions of power who then profiteer off state assets.

The revolution, known locally as the "Revolution of Dignity" or simply as "Maidan," after the square where some of the most high profile protests took place, held such potential for the former jewel of the Soviet empire that aspired to have closer ties with Western Europe and the U.S.

Amid these tensions, and promises still to be fulfilled, Ukraine's ambassador to the U.S., Valeriy Chaly, responded to questions about the future of his country. Excerpts:

In the two years since Russia's intervention in Ukraine began, what have you learned about Moscow's motivations for the region? What do you think the West may have misinterpreted about

what Russia wants?

Let us go back and recall that the occupation of Crimea and invasion in Donbass began right after the people of Ukraine had declared their Western and democratic aspiration on Maidan in early 2014. Realizing the power of that aspiration, Kremlin has begun to fear an appearance of a viable democracy next to its border and has acted violently to disrupt Ukraine's westward integration. In the course of these tragic events, Ukraine as well as many of its international partners, some of which had used to enjoy pragmatic cooperation with Russia, now learned or gained confidence in a fact that the Russian regime cannot be trusted. By attempting to annex Crimea and invading Donbass, Russia has violated more than 400 norms of the international law and it continues to fail in upholding its commitments under the Minsk agreements. Now, Russia wants to install a distortion mechanism in Donbass through its puppet-regimes in Donetsk and Luhansk to hamper Ukraine's economic recovery and rapprochement towards the EU and NATO.

What hopes do you have that Crimea will ever be an uncontested part of Ukraine again?

These are not hopes but a clear vision that this part of Ukraine will be reintegrated. It also requires the world's continuous commitment to the international law and to the human rights issue. Crimean Tatars – indigenous people of the peninsula – are harshly repressed by the Russian-controlled authorities, they are killed, abducted, intimidated, their rights for free speech and assembly are suppressed, their representative bodies banned. Crimea's infrastructure and economy are an indivisible part of Ukraine and when Ukraine will become a successful economic and democratic model, it will inevitably get reintegrated with Ukraine.

Leaders within Ukraine's government have been accused of corruption and stifling reforms in recent months, and the latest elections seem to have elevated leaders with close ties to President Poroshenko. How does the Ukrainian government plan to convince its people that it is indeed successfully fighting corruption and instituting political reforms? What do you think the Ukrainian people expect?

The Ukrainian people have set very high expectations after the Revolution of Dignity amplified by deaths of all fallen heroes on Maidan and in Donbass. Criticism of the reforms is normal and even welcome in a democratic society and it is a big progress that there is a freedom of speech in Ukraine, unlike in Russia. But it is not less important to recognize deliverables of the government, which works to establish a viable and resilient system to fight corruption, ensure the rule of law and create a favorable business climate.

There is now a set of strong anti-corruption institutions created in a transparent manner with participation of the civil-society. The National Anti-Corruption Bureau is working in full swing investigating high-level corruption cases. Ukraine's new electronic public procurement system Pro-Zorro, which ensures transparency even in such, traditionally, closed agencies as the Ministry of Defense, has gained international recognition winning World Procurement Awards 2016.

The new National Police that now operating in most of Ukraine's big cities is another example of a successful systemic reform meeting high expectations of the Ukrainian people and our international partners. The government also did a chore in its gas sector eliminating all gas trade intermediaries, who have been there for decades siphoning billions of U.S. dollars without producing any added value.

Some reforms are not popular but necessary, like increase of gas tariffs for households, which, however enabled disruption of corrupt schemes that in the past allowed businesses to benefit from subsidized prices for households.

There are more to go – the government will embark on sweeping privatization, continue judiciary, prosecution, healthcare, civil sector and other reforms. However, the previous systemic steps that have already established necessary institutions and transparency tools will make this future process much easier to implement and meet the people's expectations.

How has Western intervention in the form of training Ukrainian troops affected the ongoing threat of Russia and Russian-backed separatists? Aside from providing lethal weaponry, what more could the West be doing, and what concerns do you have that could incite further retaliation from Moscow?

The West, particularly the U.S., provided essential support to Ukraine through train-and-equip programs, first for the National Guard and later for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. It has played an important role in enhancing defense capacity of Ukraine, signaling that Ukraine is strong and can repel further Russian aggression.

And so we have to carry out compounding the continuous support of our partners with our national reform effort, which has extensively swept through our security sector. Because, it has been the weakness of Ukraine and of the international reaction to Crimea's occupation in early 2014 that has provoked the Russian aggression.

To avoid further retaliation from Moscow and to stop the ongoing dangerous escalation in Donbass

we have to strengthen Ukraine and our partnership. It means strong Transatlantic solidarity with Ukraine, including maintenance of the sanctions, never resorting to the policy of appeasement of an aggressor, U.S. leadership in supporting democratic choice of Ukraine, as well as bringing Ukraine closer to the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Kaynak/Source: