



The
Kazakh,
View



Russian Support of Ukrainian Insurgency is Rational by Moscow's Standards

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The events that took place in Ukraine, after the declaration in November 2013 that the Ukrainian leadership would not utilize the Eastern Partnership agreement with the European Union, clearly illustrate the growing importance and influence of irregular armed groups. The concept of “irregular armed groups” is not new by any means, but the idea of using this concept to explain current geopolitical trends is novel.

The West unequivocally condemned Russian interference in the Ukrainian crisis. One thing is clear: The smaller the geographical distance between your state and a state experiencing civil war, the less opportunity you have to make strategic choices. Conversely, the greater the distance separating you and insurgents demanding your assistance, the easier it will be for you to decline.

The situation is even more complicated in cases when deciding whether to support irredentists — i.e., citizens of another country who are ethnically close to your own countrymen. Refusing to provide support in such a case will inevitably lead to internal political destabilization and can even delegitimize the state authorities. For example, let us try a thought experiment: Could the Kremlin and President Vladimir Putin himself refuse to support Russians in Crimea?

Rural landscape
in Crimean
mountains

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Theoretically, yes, but in practice, no. In my opinion, the choice made was not strategic as much as situational. Without a doubt, Putin

took into consideration the geopolitical and economic costs of the annexation of Crimea. However, he was also fully aware that Russia's leadership would face even greater costs by distancing itself from the Ukrainian crisis and foregoing Crimea. All this falls neatly in line with rational-choice theory.

Can Russia and Putin personally refuse to provide support to insurgents in so-called Novorossiia, turning away from them completely? Again, theoretically, yes, but in practice, no. We see that even if Russian military vehicles and more groups of well-trained insurgents infiltrated Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts from the Russian side of the border, many Russians and even citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States (especially those in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO) would accuse Putin of “betraying” Russians, of jettisoning Novorossiia, of spinelessness, indecision and even political cowardice.

The Russian term “povstanets,” like the English equivalent “insurgent,” is a highly ambiguous term: Each user imbues it with his own meaning and definition. For example, the authorities of any given state can consider insurrectionists, terrorists, separatists, religious extremists, etc., to all fall under this label — as individuals who operate outside the law and conduct an armed struggle with a legitimate government. Foreign governments that support these same “insurgents,” however, emphasize their just struggle against the illegitimate and “cruel” dictatorial authorities.

Certainly, states (or rather, ruling elites)



Ukrainian soldiers sit on an armored vehicle near Kramatorsk in September 2014 during the conflict with pro-Russian separatists. EPA

on the territories on which such insurgents are active find themselves faced with a strategic dilemma when it comes to receiving assistance from abroad. However, we should not exclusively think in terms of conceptual constructs or generalizations that are distant from concrete reality.

We know, for example, that states such as Iraq and Afghanistan need foreign support on a daily basis if they are to fight insurgents successfully. Despite some degree of progress achieved through U.S. military interventions, these states continue to be politically unstable. They are threatened not only by insurgents and separatism, as well as interethnic and sectarian conflicts, but also by poor development of democratic institutions and weak militaries and intelligence services, all against a backdrop of universal corruption. If the truth be told, they are failed states.

Can Iraq and Afghanistan afford to decline help from abroad? Of course not. In any case, their current governments cannot stay in power without foreign military and financial assistance. For example, the current authorities in Afghanistan, given a complete withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops, risk a repetition of the fate of Mohammad Najibullah

and his government, who were replaced by the Taliban in 1992.

Therefore, the states named above have almost no choice but to request help. Of course, they not only need support, they are demanding it. Foreign support is keeping them afloat, making it possible to maintain the apparatus of power, support an army, pay wages, promote welfare and hold off socio-economic problems. At the same time, if a country like Afghanistan receives foreign support, it has to settle for being seen as a puppet state, bound by the far-reaching entanglements of foreign powers. Foreign aid (especially financial aid) often catalyzes the spread of corruption, while donated weaponry eventually could end up in the hands of the insurgents. Certain clans and regions are visibly dissatisfied by what they see as an unjust distribution of foreign aid. So any foreign support is a double-edged sword. Can the current leaders of Ukraine decline foreign aid? Of course not. Turning down Western aid in the current crisis would be suicidal.

Kiev's international currency reserves are vanishing at an astonishing rate (the current total is just \$17 billion. The load on the state budget is also



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Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine, including people hoisting communist flags, take part in a rally in Donetsk in September 2014.



EPA

Ukrainian Army soldiers arrive in Mariupol, Ukraine, in September 2014 to combat pro-Russian separatists.

growing, as the “Anti-Terrorism Operation” in the southeast is costing \$2 million to \$7 million daily. The national currency is losing value as I write. Debts to Russia for past shipments of natural gas are continuing to grow. Industrial production is falling, largely due to the war. Without a doubt, Ukraine cannot resolve its financial and economic problems alone.

It should be recognized that, left to fight Russia one on one, Ukraine can bid farewell to any chance of existing as a sovereign state. The war in the southeast has seen some sporadic successes for Kiev, but the troops are badly equipped, insufficiently armed and struggle to maintain supply lines for food and other basics.

Kiev simply cannot survive without significant political, financial, economic and military assistance from the United States, the EU and NATO members (at least including experts, instructors, as well as supplies of nonlethal equipment and military ammunition). In addition, Ukraine has an acute need for support from the West under the aegis of the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and other international organizations. More than this, Ukraine is not ready for serious negotiations with Russia without the involvement of Western partners.

The flipside of the situation is equally self-evident — for many Ukrainians, the authorities in Kiev lack legitimacy and autonomy. Many in the country (and elsewhere, especially in Russia and Kazakhstan), are convinced that President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk are not independent political figures, but are beholden to Brussels and Washington. It is often said that if there is to be

a solution to the crisis, it will be forged by global players behind the back of Ukraine.

But is the West ready to assume full responsibility for today’s Ukraine? Is it ready to support the Ukrainian economy, which is desperate not only for foreign investment and technology, but also new commercial markets? Is the West ready to foot the bill for Ukraine’s energy security, when Yatseniuk threatens to cut off Russian gas flowing through the country to serve the EU? Is the West ready to finance the Ukrainian budget? These are all important questions.

Moreover, Ukraine could end up as just one more failed state, unable to exist without massive external support. In its current state, it cannot be a full-fledged member of the EU and will not be much closer to membership five years from now. After losing its clients in Russia, Ukraine may fail to find any substitute market in the West. More than this, there is a risk that Western aid may not ever be used to modernize and diversify the Ukrainian economy, but instead be swallowed up simply supporting the balance of payments. As in Iraq and Afghanistan, foreign aid could also fuel corruption.

The expert community in Russia, the Eurasian Economic Union and the CSTO broadly agree that the goal of the West is not for Ukraine to be integrated into Europe, but merely to prevent the country’s Eurasian integration. Many experts believe that the West is still working from Zbigniew Brzezinski’s assumption that a new Russian empire (whatever name it may have) will be incomplete, and even unsustainable, without Ukraine. The question remains whether Ukraine itself can be viable once separated from Russia. □