

# Five minutes with Andreas Umland: “Russia could solve the conflict quickly by simply withdrawing its support from the separatists”

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12/05/2014

*The situation in Eastern and Southern Ukraine remains extremely complex, following two referendums being held in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk on the issue of establishing ‘self-rule’ from Ukraine. In an interview with EUOPP’s Managing Editor Stuart Brown, [Andreas Umland](#) discusses the differences between the situation in eastern/southern Ukraine and what took place in Crimea, the military dimension to the conflict, and what actions from the EU and Russia could help resolve the crisis.*



**Following events in Crimea, the focus of the crisis has now shifted to mainland eastern and southern Ukraine. Are we now witnessing a similar process taking place, or are there key differences between Crimea and these regions which are likely to lead to a different outcome?**

If compared to the situation in Crimea, there are two key differences in the Russian-speaking regions of eastern and southern Ukraine. First, support for separatism and annexation to Russia, as well as the proportion of ethnic Russians in the population, is significantly lower. Although the actual support for annexation to Russia in Crimea is also much lower than the alleged result of 97 per cent produced in the infamous 16 March pseudo-referendum, around half of Crimea’s population has been reported to be in favour of annexation in various opinion polls. While separatism also has some popular support in the east and south of Ukraine, reaching, in some regions, around 30 per cent, it is not even close to a relative majority there.

The second key difference, in terms of possible annexation by Russia, is that there are no clear borders between Ukrainian-speaking central Ukraine, on the one side, and Russian-speaking eastern and southern Ukraine on the other. Therefore, the occasional suggestion to divide Ukraine according to the model of Czechoslovakia’s split is misleading. It is not clear where the Ukrainian “Slovakia” ends, and where Ukraine’s equivalent of the Czech Republic begins.

That would also be a problem for the Kremlin: Russian troops could certainly invade eastern Ukraine and would probably crush the Ukrainian army, at least initially. But where would they stop? How far would they go? In the case of Crimea, physical geography prescribed the borders of the invasion. But for mainland Ukraine, no clear borders – be they physical, cultural, or demographic – exist.

I would not fully exclude some sort of military aggression by regular Russian troops in eastern Ukraine, but a second annexation following the Crimean example looks unlikely. It would trigger large-scale Western economic sanctions. Being a weak strategist, Putin has so far been a shrewd short-term tactician and coldblooded calculator. If there is no guarantee of a quick, at least partial success, my guess is he will not take on the risks of another annexation.

**The Ukrainian government has been engaged in what it terms ‘anti-terrorist’ operations against the groups which have seized buildings in eastern cities and towns. Could this potentially spill-over into a civil war?**

The term “civil war” is, in some sense, a misnomer. The only recently emerged military and para-military dimensions of this political conflict are due to Russian meddling. That included an aggressive propaganda campaign via Kremlin-controlled mass media (‘fascism’, ‘putsch’, ‘junta’, ‘Auschwitz’ etc.) that made its imprint in eastern and southern Ukraine.

It also comprised covert direct participation: i.e. Russian material support for the separatists, including targeted deployment of small special army units, the provision of large amounts of weaponry to the separatists, as well as likely transfers of money, and political as well as diplomatic support for them. Without these factors, the existing inner-Ukrainian confrontations would have remained in the domestic political realm. Sometimes the clashes, to be sure, would and did include street brawls and other physical scuffles – even in parliament. But that was and would have been it.

Now the Ukrainian government is in a serious dilemma. If it is too soft on the armed separatists, who they call ‘terrorists’, it will be (and indeed already is) perceived as weak by both the Ukrainian population and the Russian leadership. If it uses force to suppress the heavily armed insurrection, civilian victims – potentially a large number of them – are likely. The Russian leadership knows this dilemma well. It is exploiting it to the full in its ‘information war’ in which the Kremlin freely ascribes responsibility for all recently wounded and killed to the Kyiv government. Worse, there seems to be a purposeful involvement of civilians in the separatists’ para-military actions on the ground so as to trigger bloodshed among the population.

**The notion of granting more autonomy to eastern regions has been put forward as a potential solution to the crisis. Does this carry genuine potential to stop the situation from escalating and how might this take place in practice?**

The idea of a need for, and solution through, greater regional autonomy – like a number of other issues in the current conflict – is a Kafkaesque one. The new government of Ukraine has developed and is now implementing a large-scale decentralisation project directed by Vice Prime-Minister Groisman, the former mayor of the city of Vinnytsia. Decentralisation has been a major agenda point of the new Ukrainian leadership from the very start. The protesters are thus demanding something that the Kyiv government is doing anyway. Groisman’s plan is to transfer considerable powers, competencies and resources to the local level from which he himself comes: i.e. to cities, districts and villages.

Another matter is the so-called ‘federalisation’ of the formally unitarian, but always only partially centralist Ukrainian state. Ukraine’s ‘federalisation’ is a measure loudly promoted by Moscow; yet the so-called Russian Federation is itself a highly centralised and only formally federal state where, apart from a few national republics, the regions are tightly controlled by Moscow. The obvious motive behind the Kremlin’s recent interest in the devolution of power from Kyiv to the regions is that this could be a first step towards a *de facto* dissolution of the Ukrainian state.

One may recall that Ukraine had, until recently, a region with a quasi-federal status within its otherwise unitary system – the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. In February-March 2014, the Kremlin skilfully utilised Crimea’s autonomy to disconnect it from the Ukrainian state and annex it to Russia. While Russia may not seek further *de jure* annexations, it is not too far-fetched a speculation that it would get actively engaged in the regional politics of the eastern and southern sub-units of a Ukrainian federation.

**There has been some suggestion that Russia is losing control of the situation, particularly given its apparent opposition to the referendums in Donetsk and Luhansk which went ahead. Could a change in policy from Russia still help to bring about a resolution to the crisis?**

Yes. Given the genesis and nature of the conflict, Russia could solve the conflict quickly by simply withdrawing its support from the separatists. That would immediately change the involved persons’ calculations. Many would simply run away. The separatist movements’ criminal parts would, in all probability, go to Russia and hide there.

**What should the EU’s key priority be in trying to stabilise the situation?**

Diplomacy is good and should be continued as intensively as before. Nevertheless, diplomacy’s record in solving this and similar issues in the past (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia) is unimpressive. Therefore, diplomacy needs to be combined with robust sanctions against relevant Russian political, intellectual and economic elite

members and their families.

There are many who have something to lose – bank accounts, credit cards, real estate, freedom of movement, study opportunities, and various other privileges. Russia’s elite is heavily integrated into Europe. Once many highly placed Russians and their relatives are forced to change their life-styles significantly, there will appear discord in the selectorate of Putin. Once the top ten thousand who make up his regime start feeling the bite, we can expect policy changes from Moscow.

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