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## Ukrainian sticks and carrots

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In international politics, timing counts. Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin started and finished his speech by reassuring the world that Russia has no designs of annexing Russian-speaking and ethnic Russian eastern Ukraine. And he stressed that Moscow is not playing a Russian gas war game.

Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine have citizenship and human rights that must be respected.

Churkin was equivocal in pinpointing the West's connivance in brewing trouble in Ukraine with the neo-Nazis and ultra-nationalists who usurped power in Kiev. He was full of insight about Western interference in Russia's southern neighbour. "It is the West that will determine the opportunity to avoid civil war in Ukraine. Some people, including in this chamber, do not want to see the real reasons for what is happening in Ukraine and are constantly seeing the hand of Moscow in what is going on," Churkin extrapolated unapologetically.

Pro-Russian separatists took control of government buildings in Donetsk, Kharkov and Luhansk on Sunday, declaring "independent republics" and calling for referendums on autonomy and possible unification with Russia.

"The miners are coming!" they declared. Ukrainians are undergoing severe economic difficulties. And neither the European Union nor the United States is in a position to assist. Moscow has a surer hand than the West in improving the economic crisis in Ukraine.

Donetsk, for instance, is the heart of eastern Ukraine's coal-mining country, historically known as the Donbass, and its football club is called the Miners. The insurrectionists in Ukraine understand that the EU is no panacea to the country's economic crisis. Russia is key.

Cynicism and idealism, ideological conviction and nationalist euphoria, as well as nostalgic sentimentality to the Soviet past plays a part in contemporary Ukrainian politics. Less so are some of the repeated predilections for becoming part of Europe as the pro-Western Ukrainian politicians aspire. The penchant for joining the EU and NATO is a bizarre and bogus predisposition. Pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich, the ousted democratically elected president of Ukraine, hails from Donetsk and many in the Donbass still call him the legitimate president of Ukraine. But that is beside the point.

Kiev officials know that they are not fighting a war of annihilation. Rather it is the Russian-speaking populace of eastern and southern Ukraine that is fighting for survival. It is a question of identity politics.

Especially trying is the unfolding of bloody battles. Armed with little more than metal bars and Molotov cocktails, pro-Russian Ukrainians are storming government buildings and seeking to join Russia proper.

Ironically, the pro-Western Ukrainian politicians' technique is to mime the written record of Soviet dictates. They do so, knowing all too well that at the time the Soviet Union was considered a single country. It did not matter whether Donetsk was in Russia or in the Ukraine, since both were part and parcel of a sovereign nation. Donetsk, a city of one million, is the industrial heart of eastern Ukraine, and three-quarters of people in the Donetsk region speak Russian as their mother tongue.

Pro-Western leaders of Ukraine are ensconced, or so they imagine, behind the West's economic clout and military might. They have little idea of how the Western powers would behave. In sharp contrast, pro-Russian armed separatists seized government buildings in the small Russian-

speaking town of Sloviansk. They seek to hold a Crimean-style referendum. They do not believe the darkest of conspiracy theories that the Kiev political elite is propounding.

The United States has failed to come up with logical answers to the Ukrainian question. “These [separatist] armed units, raised Russian and separatist flags over seized buildings and have called referendums and union with Russia. We know who is behind this,” US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Powers proclaimed.

“We can’t see any other way to ensure the stable development of Ukraine but to sign a federal agreement,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov countered.

The West knows it has no say in the matter. Why they are leading the pro-West Ukrainian political elite in Kiev is an enigma. The White House is scheduled to dispatch US Vice President Joe Biden to Kiev on 22 April to demonstrate Washington’s high-level support for Kiev. US Secretary of State John Kerry warned his Russian counterpart that any further interference by Moscow in Ukrainian internal affairs would “incur further costs for Russia” and urged Moscow to “publicly disavow the activities of separatists, saboteurs and provocateurs”. Hogwash. Does Kerry not really understand that Russia is going from strength to strength?

Kerry may end up looking weaker than he does already. The Ukrainian political elite in Kiev has declared Russian-speaking separatists in the eastern part of the country as “terrorists”. The West and their Ukrainian cohorts in Kiev are tackling the political realities and ideological themes of post-Soviet Union politics without descending into an incredulous sentimentality about freedoms and civil rights.

The stage is set for a showdown. Russian-speaking Donetsk separatists said a referendum on independence from Ukraine would be held 11 May and proclaimed that they have been coordinating with pro-Russians in the Kharkov and Luhansk regions. All three regions have appealed to Putin for help. The Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, is at a loss as to how to deal with the possible dismemberment of the country.

There is a constant satirical edge to the speeches of American officials. And these statements are parroted by pro-West Ukrainian officials in Kiev. “Executive committees of each region will be handed all financial, economic, administrative and other powers so they control their own territories, giving them the ability to develop these territories to attract investment and receive additional income for each region by amending the budget law of Ukraine,” Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the acting Ukrainian prime minister, told reporters in Kiev.

The West is turning a blind eye to reality in the Ukraine and former Soviet republics. Yes, the Baltic States managed to escape Russia’s stranglehold and have joined the EU. But Ukraine cannot do the same, and especially not by uttering a few vague pro-West public statements. Moscow has urged Ukraine to embrace a federal system of government and insists on the devolution of power to the regions to ensure the rights of Russian-speakers in eastern Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is not pandering to Russian-speaking Ukrainians or ethnic Russians in Ukraine for political gain. He issued a warning to Ukraine over its arrears on its gas imports from Russia and insisted that Kiev pays upfront.

Meanwhile, Wolfgang Schauble, Germany's finance minister and a veteran of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrat Party, compared Putin to Adolf Hitler. Merkel warned that the Russian annexation of Crimea is in clear breach of international law, but stopped short of supporting Schauble. He himself later declared that his words were "taken out of context".

"The National Security and Defence Council has decided to launch a full-scale anti-terrorist operation involving the armed forces of Ukraine," Oleksander Turchinov, the Ukrainian acting president threatened. Does he actually believe that anyone in eastern Ukraine will take him seriously?

Federalism, as Putin suggested, is the only way forward. Russia is not about to annex Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine. Pro-West politicians in Kiev will have to tread carefully. Pro-Russia Ukrainians will get a kick out of their rebuttal of the West and its proxies in Kiev. There is, after all, a dire need to reframe the debate about Ukraine's political future, as Putin so aptly puts it.