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Ukraine: New President, Old Violence

By Vladimir Golstein

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There is something rotten at the heart of Europe. The festering wound of Ukraine cannot heal. Hopes associated with the election of the new president disappeared as fast as the bubbles of the celebratory champagne, replaced by images of Donetsk airport bombing. What are the reasons behind such a debut? Does it represent a strong leadership or reckless cruelty? Historical precedents that come to mind to justify such violence hardly apply to President Poroshenko. To paraphrase a well-known French aphorism, Poroshenko's decision to bomb Donetsk was worse than a crime, it was a blunder. The sooner this recklessness is corrected, the better. The wound is festering.

Contemplating the ruthless acts of his hero, Napoleon, Dostoevsky's intellectual criminal, Raskolnikov, observes: "The real ruler, to whom everything is permitted, destroys Toulon, butchers in Paris... and when he is dead they put up statues to him... Such people are plainly not made of flesh, but of bronze."

Indeed, Napoleon's early political successes owe much to his ruthlessness toward the French. Does the newly elected President of Ukraine envision himself a new Napoleon destined to save the Ukrainian revolution with the help of planes and artillery? The former President Victor Yanukovich who could have easily denounced protesters as "terrorists" and crushed them on Maidan Square, preferred to remain a man of flesh, rather than bronze. For the newly elected

president, however, dozens of civilians massacred in Odessa are not enough. He needs more blood.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to view Poroshenko as a visionary politician of Napoleon's stature. Napoleon presided over the historical moment when old Europe was confronted new universal ideals of "*Egalite, Fraternite, and Liberte*." If anyone, it is not the oligarch Poroshenko, but the population of eastern Ukraine who rebels for the sake of these ideals. With a hundred Ukrainian oligarchs, including Poroshenko, in control of 85 % of the national wealth, these owners of Ukraine leave the American wealthiest 1% in the dust. We are talking about 0.00002% of Ukrainian population possessing practically the whole country. Poroshenko's oligarchic politics and exclusionary nationalism are no remedy for 99.99998% of his population.

The Donbass region that Poroshenko chose to attack is a land of numerous contradictions, which range from economic and social to ecological, cultural, and political. The tensions in the region are real and they can clearly explode. It is revealing that Ukraine's richest oligarch, Renat Akhmetov – along with some other regional oligarchs – ran away from Donbass in fear, avoiding thus the confrontation with protesters who tried to seize his estate and threaten to nationalize his possessions. The oligarchs have plenty to fear from the real Ukrainian revolution; it is their methods that contribute to unrest. Organized labor so far has been wavering in its attitude toward Kiev, but if the bombing continues workers will act. Poroshenko, and the oligarchic rule that he embodies, is a far cry from the ideals of French revolution. In fact, according to WikiLeaks documents, American diplomats in Kiev viewed Poroshenko as "discredited oligarch" and as "deeply unpopular politician."

Did Poroshenko imagine himself in the role of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, who crushed the protesters at Tiananmen Square, ushering in years of Chinese economic boom? Is that what turns him into a man of bronze – the desire to introduce harsh economic measures in order to turn Ukraine into an economic powerhouse? China did begin its economic ascent with the ruthless crushing of protesters. Yet, wealthy as Poroshenko is, he is hardly an embodiment of strategic economic thinking. He made his millions primarily through his government contacts, while serving in public sector in various positions that range from being a member of parliament to foreign minister, the minister of economic development, and a member of President Yushenko inner circle. One doubts that Poroshenko's business model would work for his country as well as it did for Poroshenko.

Another model for emulation might be closer at hand. President Putin's ascent to power and popularity was accompanied by his aggressive policy in Chechnya. The so-called Second Chechen War (1999-2009) catapulted Putin into what seems to be a permanent presidency. It has started in response to several terror attacks committed by the Chechens in their quest for independence from Russia. Rather than negotiating or exploring alternative possibilities, Putin labeled Chechens "bandits and terrorists," and refused to negotiate with them.

As he was invading the region, Putin – then the prime minister of Russia – has written an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, in which he justified the invasion in the words, familiar to anyone: "No government can stand idly by when terrorism strikes... Our immediate aim is to rid Chechnya of those who threaten the safety of Chechens and Russians. We also seek to restore

civil society to the Chechen people, who have been victims of ...armed criminal gangs for years."

Poroshenko's own words to a BBC correspondent sound the same: "[W]e cannot negotiate with killers, murderers, and terrorists who do not represent anyone."

It is quite ironic, that after all the Putin-bashing that dominates Ukrainian media, Poroshenko's own TV channel included, the newly minted Ukrainian president has decided to follow Putin. Equally ironic, is that Western leaders who criticized Putin for his treatment of "terrorists," haven't pronounced a word of criticism in response to Poroshenko.

Civil wars have dynamics of their own, they unfold and gain strength with every new brutality, so it is naïve to believe that crushing Donbass will be a matter of hours, as Poroshenko promised. The Ukrainian crisis is not going away.

The Chechen region is pacified now, but at a price of long-lasting war, thousands of lives, and radicalized Chechen population, whose desperate attacks continue to destroy people from neighborhood Ossetia, where hundreds of school children were killed, all the way to Boston Marathon explosions. Does Poroshenko want to turn Donbass into a new Chechnya?

The Chechen war revealed an important logic behind Putin's actions. Rather than earning through modernizing economy, Putin decided to achieve it by means of assertive and victorious policies over real or imaginary enemies. Is that the path that Poroshenko wants to take? And can he emulate Putin who proved to be a great master at scoring various victories, ranging from Syria to Snowden?

While the benefits of Putin's harsh measures can be debated, his model simply would not work for Poroshenko. Russia's wealth of resources and military experience was pitted against tiny Chechnya. Poroshenko's demoralized army and an economy devastated by the years of mismanagement confronts a well-organized, and increasingly radicalized region and its powerful supporter in the east. Without even direct interference, Russia can flood the region with arms, volunteers, and financial aid that will overwhelm any western support. The news and pictures coming from the area are so devastating that there is no lack of volunteers ready to help their relatives being butchered across the Russian border.

Ever belligerent, Napoleon still recognized that "there are but two powers in the world, the sword and the mind. In the long run the sword is always beaten by the mind." Why can't Poroshenko demonstrate the true European leadership, and get involved in negotiations, instead of bombing. Yet, as recently as this Tuesday, the prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, of "Yats is the guy" fame, decided to live up to his notoriety by declaring that he won't meet with Russia without EU or US representatives. If that's the case, can anyone in EU or US, simply say to Poroshenko: "Dear Petro. You're no Napoleon. But you can become the first Ukrainian president in recent history who would be remembered without mockery or contempt. Go and negotiate with all the parties on the ground."?

Unless, the festering wound at the heart of Europe is their objective after all.

