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## The Risk of a Ukraine Bloodbath

By Ray McGovern

July 2, 2014

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko – by thumbing his nose at the leaders of Russia, Germany and France as they repeatedly appealed to him to renew the fragile ceasefire in eastern Ukraine – has left himself and his U.S. patrons isolated, though that’s not the version of the story that you’ll read in the mainstream U.S. press.

But the reality is that an unusual flurry of high-level conference calls last weekend from key European capitals failed to dissuade Poroshenko from launching major attacks on opposition forces in eastern Ukraine. Washington was alone in voicing support for Poroshenko’s decision, with a State Department spokeswoman saying “he has a right to defend his country.”

As Ukrainian air and artillery strikes increased on Tuesday, so did diplomatic activity among the Europeans with the U.S. playing no discernible role in the peace efforts. There was no sign, for example, that Secretary of State John Kerry was invited to a hastily called meeting in Berlin on Wednesday involving the foreign ministers of Germany (Frank-Walter Steinmeier), France (Laurent Fabius), Russia (Sergey Lavrov), and newly appointed Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin.

This marginalization of the U.S. is a consequence of a well-founded suspicion that Poroshenko’s fateful decision to “attack” came with Washington’s encouragement. The continued provocative behavior of Secretary Kerry, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland

and other U.S. hardliners comes despite the fact that Russian President Vladimir Putin still holds the high cards in this regional standoff.

Putin has at his disposal a range of alternatives short of sending in tanks to protect the ethnic Russians of eastern Ukraine, many of whom had voted for President Viktor Yanukovych who was ousted in February by violent protests. The uprising was led by western Ukrainians demanding closer ties to Europe but was turned into a “regime change” on Feb. 22 through a putsch spearheaded by neo-Nazi militias contemptuous of the ethnic Russians living in the east and south.

Yanukovych’s ouster was strongly encouraged by Nuland, who handpicked Arseniy Yatsenyuk to be the leader of the interim government, while at least four ministries were awarded to the neo-Nazis, including the office of national security, in recognition of their key role in the final attacks that forced Yanukovych and his officials to flee for their lives.

Though hailed as “legitimate” by the U.S. State Department, the coup regime was rejected by many ethnic Russians in eastern and southern Ukraine. In Crimea, the population voted overwhelmingly to secede from Ukraine and rejoin Russia, a development that U.S. officials and the dutiful mainstream media characterized as a Russian “invasion.”

Similarly, in the east, in the so-called Donbass region, ethnic Russians rose up and asserted their independence from the Kiev regime, which then deemed them “terrorists” and launched an “antiterrorist” campaign that incorporated some of the neo-Nazi militias as National Guard units deployed as shock troops to crush the uprising. Several bloody massacres of ethnic Russians followed in Odessa and other cities.

In May, the election of Poroshenko – in balloting mostly conducted in western and central Ukraine – held out some hope for a negotiated settlement with guarantees to respect the ethnic Russian population and greater autonomy granted to the eastern regions. However, Poroshenko had trouble getting control of his hardliners and he refused to negotiate directly with the rebels, leading to the failure of a shaky ceasefire.

## **A Fateful Decision**

While the focus over recent days has been on Poroshenko’s decision to end the ceasefire and go on the offensive, Putin has continued to rely on diplomacy as his primary tool, especially with European officials fearful of the economic consequences of a full-scale confrontation between Russia and the West. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has made considerable headway in getting at least Berlin and Paris to join Moscow in trying to restrain Washington in its apparent eagerness to stoke the fires in Ukraine.

Speaking on Russian TV on Saturday, Lavrov said, “Peace within the warring country [Ukraine] would be more likely if negotiations were left to Russia and Europe,” adding, “Our American colleagues ... according to a lot of evidence, still favor pushing the Ukrainian leadership towards the path of confrontation.”

That evidence is increasingly evident to Europeans. What is new is their apparent willingness to slip softly out of their accustomed lockstep subservience to the U.S. in such matters.

Washington is losing support elsewhere in Europe as well. Last Thursday, Kerry declared it “critical for Russia to show in the next hours, literally, that it is moving to help disarm the separatists,” and on Friday the European Union leaders set a Monday deadline for Russia to take a series of steps to avoid further sanctions.

Alas, Monday showed the Europeans putting off any action for at least another week. This delay has driven the editors of the neocon flagship Washington Post to distraction; in Wednesday’s edition they pouted that such lack of resolve amounts to “craven surrender” to “Russian aggression.”

Putin, meanwhile, is maintaining a determined coolness in his public remarks. In a major speech on Tuesday, he noted, in a more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger tone:

“Unfortunately, President Poroshenko has resolved to resume military action, and we failed – when I say ‘we,’ I mean my colleagues in Europe and myself – we failed to convince him that the road to a secure, stable, and inviolable peace cannot lie through war. ... Mr. Poroshenko had not been directly linked to the orders to begin military action, and only now did he take full responsibility, and not only military, but political as well, which is much more important.

“We also failed to agree to make public a statement approved by the foreign ministers of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine on the need to maintain peace and search for mutually acceptable solutions.”

### **Focus on Europe**

Putin reminded his audience of Russian ambassadors that “Europe is our natural and most significant trade and economic partner.” Adding a gentle reminder about Europe’s dependence on natural gas from Russia, Putin noted that Moscow had developed a reputation as a “reliable supplier of energy resources.” He also explained why Russia has put Ukraine on a pre-payment system for the delivery of natural gas, noting that Kiev had not paid its bill for several months.

Putin also took a dig at economic “blackmail” in referring to “the pressure our American partners are putting on France to force it not to supply Mistral [helicopter carrier ships] to Russia.” Russia bought two Mistral-class ships from France for \$1.6 billion in what was Moscow’s first major foreign arms purchase since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Appearing on French TV last month, Putin said, “We expect our French partners to fulfill their contractual obligations” and held out the prospect of future orders, an important enticement given France’s struggling economy.

Toward the end of his speech Putin also drew attention to the spread of “radical, neo-Nazi” elements not only in the fledgling states of the former USSR, “but also in Europe as a whole.”

He warned that “social contradictions ... can be a breeding ground for ... the growth of extremism.”

Putin added that even in seemingly stable countries ethnic and social contradictions can suddenly escalate and become ripe for external players “to seek illegitimate, non-democratic regime change, with all the ensuing negative consequences.”

Putin seems to be challenging the Germans and French, in particular, who have had direct experience living under fascism (and who now have their own home-bred fascists to deal with), to decide whether they really wish to acquiesce in the brutal suppression of southeastern Ukrainians with the help of admirers of the late Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera and other Ukrainian fascists who helped Hitler cleanse Ukraine of Jewish and Russian “vermin.”

There is serious question as to whether Poroshenko can now rein in these Frankenstein extremists even if he seriously tried to do so. The ultra-nationalists and other hardliners in western Ukraine have made it clear to Poroshenko that they expect him to fulfill his promises about rapidly crushing the eastern Ukrainian uprising.

Meanwhile, the neocon-dominated Western mainstream media has consistently downplayed the role of fascists and neo-Nazis in the Putsch of Feb. 22, in the subsequent violence in other key cities like Odessa, and now in southeastern Ukraine. Mentioning Ukraine’s “brown shirts” destroys the U.S. media’s preferred narrative of Washington-backed “white hats” vs. Moscow-backed “black hats.”

The Russians, of course, have their own violent history with fascists and seem intent on waking other Europeans to the dangers – with the coup in Kiev a very recent reminder. Professor Stephen F. Cohen of New York University provides an excellent wrap-up of the evidence on this issue in a new article, “The Silence of American Hawks About Kiev’s Atrocities.”

### **Taking the Ukrainian Army Seriously**

Nastupat is a strong word in Ukrainian and Russian. It means “attack” – and Poroshenko hit the word hard in announcing he had ordered his forces to “attack and free our lands.” He seemed intent not only on snubbing his peace-seeking telephone partners from last weekend, but also on channeling John Kerry’s hawkish buddy John McCain.

There were even hints of Bandera’s old attitude about ethnically purifying Ukraine in Poroshenko’s warning that Kiev’s new attack would rid Ukraine of “parasites.” The Ukrainian defense ministry quickly announced the launching of attacks “from the air and land,” and the violence has escalated sharply.

It struck me, though, as I watched the short clip from Reuters that the Washington Post and Huffington Post ran before the footage of Poroshenko’s solemn “nastupat” announcement, that the segment did nothing to burnish the image of the Ukrainian troops he is sending off to battle.

The clip shows a ragged line of soldiers applauding two comrades as each approaches the corpulent, fatigue-clad, Poroshenko for an award that looks like a small box of chocolates – presumably from Poroshenko’s own candy factory.

The choreography was not the best. Nor has been the performance of Ukrainian troops sent to the east so far. But it would be far too easy to underestimate the kinds of casualties that elite Ukrainian units are capable of inflicting on lightly armed opponents – not to mention the highly trained Right Sektor and other fascists. A bloodbath may be in the offing.

### **Will Good Sense Prevail?**

In his speech on Tuesday, Putin expressed the hope that “pragmatism will eventually prevail.” He tucked in one short paragraph relating directly to Russia’s relations with the U.S., stating merely, “We are not going to shut down our relationship with the United States,” while conceding that relations “are not in good shape” and blaming Washington for ignoring Russia’s “legitimate interests.”

And there is some reason to hope that, as the foreign ministers of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine gather in Berlin, they will be able to reinstate the ceasefire and move the conflict off the battlefield and onto the negotiating table.

If Poroshenko chooses the path of bloodshed, however, Putin will react strongly. Russia can be counted on to supply arms to those under air and artillery attack from the Ukrainian military. If this proves to be not enough support, Moscow may decide to do even more, possibly adopting a favorite American strategy of declaring a “no-fly zone” and shooting down attacking aircraft.

But any overt or even covert Russian government assistance to the rebels would, in turn, be sure to add fuel to the fiery hysteria in Official Washington about “Russian aggression.” There would be demands on President Barack Obama to retaliate. Who knows where this madness would end?

In the first part of his Tuesday speech, Putin was upfront about the possibility of a Russian intervention to stop any Ukrainian military slaughter of ethnic Russians. He said he “would like to make clear” to all that Moscow might feel compelled to protect “Russians and Russian-speaking citizens of the Ukraine. ... I am referring to those people who consider themselves part of the broad Russian community; they may not necessarily be ethnic Russians, but they consider themselves Russian people.”

Putin said, “This country will continue to actively defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire range of available means – from political and economic to the right to self-defense envisaged by international humanitarian law.”

Putin’s reference to “international humanitarian law” sounds very much like the “Responsibility to Protect” so favored by some of President Obama’s foreign policy advisers, though apparently not when the people doing the killing are being supported by the U.S. government.

If an even more dangerous crisis is to be averted, the Russian leader's words need to be taken seriously. To stanch bloodletting in eastern Ukraine and to protect those on the receiving end of Poroshenko-authorized attacks, I would not expect Putin to let himself be mouse-trapped into invading Ukraine – at least not until he had exhausted all other alternatives.

More likely, he would impose a no-fly zone in an attempt to shield the opposition in the east and save it from being decimated. But that itself could represent a dangerous escalation. Poroshenko and his supporters should realize that such matters can quickly get out of hand. Putin has his own tough-guy John McCains to deal with.

Someone might remind Poroshenko of the embarrassingly bloody nose that the Russians gave Georgia's then-President Mikheil Saakashvili in August 2008 when he sent Georgian forces to attack the city of Tskhinvali in South Ossetia. Moscow justified its military retaliation as necessary to prevent the killing of Russians as well as the Ossetians in the area.

Ultimately, President George W. Bush and then-Republican presidential candidate John McCain, who had encouraged Saakashvili's adventurism, were powerless to protect him.