

Newly Elected President Petro Poroshenko Should Recognize That Eastern Ukraine Is Lost

WASHINGTON – Now Ukraine has a legitimate, elected president: Petro Poroshenko. A self-made wealthy industrialist, (chocolate is his sector), Poroshenko is no stranger to politics and policy-making, having served as Foreign Minister after the 2004 Orange Revolution. And (fluent in English) Poroshenko will be more at ease in international fora than all his predecessors.

A good first step

This is a good first step for Ukraine. The country needs a legitimate leadership that can credibly engage the West in the very complicated negotiations aimed at providing financial and economic support, as the nation is trying to emerge from the ugly mess of protracted political upheaval, economic mismanagement and endemic corruption.

No way to win in the East

That said, President Poroshenko, hopefully with the help of a new parliament, will have to make a bold policy choice on Eastern Ukraine. It is obvious that the Russia-inspired and Russia-funded insurrection cannot be defeated, simply because Ukraine lacks the military means and the funds to fight a protracted civil war in the East. And, even if the Kiev government did have the means, the suffering of the civilian population is likely to be immense, while the probability of eventual victory is practically zero.

No help from America or Europe

Here is the reality. Ukraine on its own cannot win, while

it will not get any military help from either America or Europe. And the West, beyond the largely symbolic sanctions imposed on a few individuals in the Russian government, will not do much more.

Which is to say that Putin can continue his undeclared but obvious destabilizing effort in Eastern Ukraine almost with impunity.

Russia has all the cards

As many analysts predict, Russia may very well be a country on a path to demographic and economic decline. But this will take a long time. Right now, when it comes to Eastern Ukraine, Putin has all the tactical and strategic advantages.

Russia can claim to have a humanitarian interest in the welfare of millions of ethnic Russians right across its borders. Moscow can easily insert into Ukraine Russian special forces and other operatives who can easily blend in with the local, mostly Russian, population and be therefore almost unidentifiable. It can supply the local militias with weapons and funds. In other words, at a relatively modest cost and without any direct, open engagement Putin's Russia can make Eastern Ukraine an ungovernable mess for as long as it wants.

Outfunded and outnumbered

And what can President Poroshenko do to put an end to all this? Quite frankly, nothing. Ukraine is outfunded and outnumbered by Russia; while the West, looking at its timid reactions thus far, will do nothing big to force Putin to stop his machinations.

Taking all this into account, for the Kiev government to keep sending east troops and helicopters that get shot down by the insurgents is madness. Ukraine is essentially broke. It is trying to negotiate IMF loans, while begging the EU to help out. Using precious resources to fight an insurrection that

can count on Moscow's unlimited support is totally crazy.

Eastern Ukraine is lost

Unless the West discovers a new bold determination that will compel Putin to stop –and I cannot see a scenario leading to this– Kiev has lost. While admitting this is painful and humiliating, once you know you have lost it is better to adjust to this reality rather than continue a useless fight.

Grant independence

The only endgame I see here is for the Kiev government to grant total autonomy, amounting to *de facto* independence, to Eastern Ukraine. Whether this independence, with subsequent annexation by Russia, would in fact reflect the genuine will of the majority of the ethnic Russians or not, this is unfortunately immaterial.

There is no way to conduct a proper referendum in which the people of Eastern Ukraine, without any pressure or intimidation, would be able to freely express their will.

Focus on reconstruction

Right now the events are driven by the Moscow-armed separatists. They have won. Kiev has lost. Let Eastern Ukraine go and focus on the daunting task of reconstructing the economy in the rest of the country, while forging meaningful ties with Europe and America.