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**Article in the journal «Analytical papers of the Institute of Europe RAS»
(Issue I) №7, 2022 (№274)**

When writings on the wall are ignored

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Usually, when big events happen, they catch most people off guard. No matter how probable it was and how many writings on the wall appeared, the decision of Russia to recognise the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Lugansk and then to launch a military operation in wider Ukraine has had a seismic effect. It was not inevitable but recent events have shifted the ground.

For Russia the option of recognition was in the making for years. Russia considers the change of power in Kiev in February 2014 as a coup d'état and with a good reason. Later Kiev completely cut off the uncontrolled territories of Donbas (more than 6 mln people) from the other part of Ukraine in 2014-2015. The financial, trade and economic blockade was introduced. The decision in March 2014 of the then acting president Alexander Turchinov to send the army to Donbas to crush separatists by military force followed by a similar decision by Petr Poroshenko in the beginning of 2015 led to a bloodshed and to bad blood in the communities. The investigations on the mass killings in February 2014 on Maidan from snipers and in May 2014 in Trade Unions house in Odessa were kicked by the new Ukrainian authorities into the long grass.

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.15211/analytics1720225255>

The central government in Kiev has been passing laws banishing Russian language and in fact Russian culture from official usage, education and mass media. Now in Ukraine there is not a single school or university, where you can get an education in Russian.

In parallel the history of the country has been rewritten glorifying nazi collaborators and demonising whatever is linked to a common cultural or historical heritage. That was the agenda of the western regions of Ukraine but not of the eastern or southern ones. Several opposition TV channels and newspapers were closed and a number of opposition figures fled the country, were killed (as Oles Buzina) or arrested (including the leader of the main opposition party Vladimir Medvedchuk). One of the signatories of Minsk 2 agreements, representing Donetsk, Alexander Zaharchenko, was assassinated in 2018 in the centre of the city.

Minsk 2 has not been implemented and was in dead end. Even the Steinmeier formula did not cut the Gordian knot. After the last Normandy summit in December 2019 Kiev on numerous occasions declared that Minsk 2 was unacceptable and should be revised or cancelled altogether. Under V. Zelenski even P. Poroshenko faced the accusations of treason as one of the signatories of Minsk 2. Zelenski, Danilov, Reznik, Kuleba and others members of the Ukrainian leadership repeatedly expressed their opposition to Minsk 2 in the last months and weeks. Moscow agreed to two more meetings of the political directors of the leaders of the Normandy format in Paris and then in Berlin but with no results. E. Macron and then O. Scholz during their recent visits to Kiev tried to convince Zelenski to return to Minsk 2 but to no avail.

Since December 2021 an extraordinary information and psychological campaign was launched by the US State Department focused on accusing Russia of the "imminent" invasion of Ukraine. It was coupled with demonstrative massive shipments to Ukraine of arms from the US, UK, Canada and other countries. By February 2022 this campaign took grotesque forms. Increasingly it looked as a propaganda of war.

Meanwhile Moscow was concentrating troops in the European part of Russia, in the Western and Southern military districts and in Belarus. In the world history to support diplomacy or national interests with a show of force is a common tool. Suffice to say that the US is fond of threatening other countries with its military might, for example in the Persian Gulf or in the Taiwan strait not to mention its numerous military adventures in 20-21 centuries. The Russian forces initially were not meant to enter Ukraine from north, or north-east or south. The only viable military option was to assist Donbas in case if there was a considerable destabilisation or provocation on the contact line.

Recently the Ukrainian forces on the contact line sharply intensified the shelling of the separatists' positions, which returned fire. Who has been doing what is clearly obvious from the OSCE Monitoring Mission maps (for example, for 17-19 February). What was also very strange that the US and UK called off their stuff from the mission, which could be taken as their desire to prevent the mission from further monitoring.

The last straw for Moscow was the Munich conference prior to which V. Zelenski repeated his opposition to Minsk 2. During the conference he also let it be known that Kiev was

contemplating a withdrawal from the Budapest memorandum vaguely hinting at a possibility to reconsider a non-nuclear status of Ukraine. Did he do it for propagandistic reasons or with some substance nobody knows. However, he was not criticised publicly for it in the West. Instead he was hailed in Munich as a hero. The critical mass of frustration and mistrust reached its ultimate point in Moscow.

On 21 February Vladimir Putin convened a unique public meeting of the Security Council. Those who spoke expressed two points of view: to give the West the last chance to stop escalation, to stop pumping armaments into Ukraine and to make Kiev to return to Minsk 2; and the rest – to recognise the two republics immediately.

The recognition of the two republics was seen by many in Russia as the least forceful from the rest of the toolkit to make the US and NATO to be more receptive to Russia's demands. This was the recognition of the fact that Kiev would never implement Minsk 2. Also this was the only legal way to provide the population of Donbas with massive social and humanitarian assistance. This was not threatening to any NATO members and this was not a creation of new military basis somewhere in the world apart from Donbas. At last, this was the only way to provide its population with security. In recent days not just the suburbs of Donetsk and Lugansk but some districts of these cities and infrastructure (water, electricity, etc.) were being shelled by the Ukrainian forces.

The option of the last push (Lavrov-Blinken meeting and then a possible summit, which Macron was trying to arrange) was not taken by the Russian leadership. Of course, the recognition, not to mention the military operation in wider Ukraine, was and is a big gamble with several unknown. But Moscow is adamant that the risks to Russia's national security are much greater if Ukraine is not barred forever from NATO, is not demilitarised and expansion of NATO is not stopped completely in eastern direction. To some extent until recently we had on our hands a new Cuban crisis in the making, but this time a Cuban crisis in reverse (an existential threat on the borders of Russia not the US). Presumably, Moscow decided to act military precisely in order to preclude such chain of events from developing rather than wait until a military clash is guaranteed not only between Russia and Ukraine but between Russia and NATO.

In a situation like this it is clear that no amount of sanctions against Russia will play any role in changing its foreign and security policy. J. Borrel tweet addressed to the deputies of Russian Duma "No more shopping in Milano, partying in Saint Tropez, diamonds in Antwerp" was pathetic.

The situation is extremely tense. It would be for mutual benefit if the West understands that Russian authorities and public opinion have never denied the right of Ukraine to sovereignty, including in the President's speech on 22 February. The main idea of this and other numerous similar declarations in the last years has been that Russia needs a friendly or at least neutral Ukraine, which does not constitute a long-term threat to Russia's security. Unfortunately, 7 years of negotiations on Minsk 2 have ended with nothing in parallel with more and more military aid, western military instructors and rising military interoperability between Ukraine and NATO. The intense diplomatic efforts of Moscow in the last two months on non-expansion of NATO has also brought no tangible results. While Moscow was demanding to

stop providing Ukraine with armaments, the US and several other allies were doing the opposite and were doing it on purpose.

By all means, it is of outmost importance that the military phase of the conflict ends as soon as possible and that diplomacy prevails again.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.15211/analytics1720225255>

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Release date: February 28, 2022.