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A DECISIVE AUTUMN FOR UKRAINE

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The destiny of Ukraine is at stake and the next six weeks will be decisive. The negotiations with Russia taking place in the context of a fragile ceasefire, and the parliamentary elections of the 26th of October will make the situation increasingly tense, putting the brittle Ukrainian stability to the test and with it, perhaps, the very idea of an independent, sovereign Ukraine.

The key points in the negotiations with Moscow are points 3 and 7 of the protocol agreed in Minsk. That is to say, the questions related to the “decentralisation of power” and, above all, to the continuation of an ambiguous “inclusive national dialogue”. Ambiguous because the Kremlin’s main objective is the effective control of Ukraine’s foreign relations. In this regard, it is necessary to understand Vladimir Putin’s call for Kiev to discuss its “state model”. Hence the proposal of special status for Donetsk and Luhansk that Petro Poroshenko have submitted to parliament this week may—despite providing for local elections and juridical guarantees for the Russian language—turn out to be insufficient for the Kremlin. In Muscovite circles close to Putin they are already talking openly about a Bosnian model for Ukraine and, significantly, the Russian federation model has already been rejected out of hand as invalid for application to the neighbouring country.

Although the Kremlin insists on denying its direct intervention, at the moment Putin calls the shots. The maintenance of the ceasefire and subsequent disarmament in the Donbass depends, above all, on the will of Moscow. The scenario has changed radically in the past three weeks: Putin has shown his open and complete determination to avoid the defeat of the pro-Russians, and sent two robust messages designed to dispel any doubts. To the pro-Russians he made it clear that without him they are lost, while the message for the Ukrainians was that if he decided to, within just a few hours he could inflict a devastating defeat on them, and, very probably, as he said to the president of the European Commission, Mr Barroso, “if I want, I’ll take Kiev in two weeks”.

While there is no need to fall into exaggerated alarmism, neither should the Kremlin’s growing aggressiveness and the implications of it for the European order be

underestimated. The mere mention by the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, that Astana reserved the right to withdraw from the Eurasian Union project was quickly met by a veiled but unequivocal threat from Putin, questioning the sovereignty and statehood of Kazakhstan. Not only does Russia claim the right to intervene in its ex-Soviet neighbours' business, it feels that doing so is wholly legitimate. As the Russian researchers, Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, point out, "in the Kremlin's eyes sovereignty is a rare phenomenon, and its bearers are only a small number of states". That is to say that sovereignty—real and not merely formal—is not the inherent condition of the state, but an exclusive privilege of the great powers of the international system, among which, obviously, Kazakhstan and Ukraine do not number.

Further, from Moscow's perspective, the post-Soviet space—and more particularly Ukraine and Kazakhstan—make up the hard core of its national security interests and its "natural" (for which read "exclusive") sphere of influence. Without Ukraine, the Eurasian Union—the project to make Russia one of the poles of a globalised, multipolar world—starts out already greatly weakened and with significantly less strategic weight. The "loss" of Ukraine is, for that reason, highly sensitive and difficult to digest for the Kremlin. To this may be added identity issues, because, in the Russian nationalist view, the idea prevails that the Ukrainians are, ultimately, Russians, and the condition of Ukraine as an independent state is merely a historical accident and just another of the geopolitical errors inherited from the Soviet period. Even before the war, the denial of Ukrainian particularity already clouded the relationship between the two countries; it is likely to continue to do so and to continue to influence both countries' domestic policy.

On the Ukrainian side, it will cause a social polarisation whose victims will be those ethnic Russians who consider themselves Ukrainian citizens and who see themselves as mute witnesses in the Kremlin's intervention strategy. On the Russian side, the paranoia about a truly independent Ukraine will be kept up and even reinforced; this is not only about a possible strengthening of ties between Kiev and NATO, but also goes to the heart of the nature of the power Putin has established. In other words, the potential, truly democratic reform of a Ukraine within the EU's sphere of influence is perceived as a direct threat by the Kremlin.

Thus, Moscow may prefer a scenario of instability and confrontations with Kiev as a lesser evil. And the lack of progress, for the moment, of the original Maidan—to fight against corruption and for a democratic, Europeanist vocation—is in fact the Kremlin's great success. Although, this achievement would have not been possible without the promotion of a conflict in the Donbass area. That is why it is likely that Putin will use the negotiations with Kiev to raise the tension as high as possible inside Ukraine. Without doubt, the combination of parliamentary elections and televised peace negotiations will be a headache for the Ukrainian authorities.

But these parliamentary elections are both essential and decisive. The war effort has received all the attention, but in order for Ukraine to face up to its deep structural challenges, a new parliament and government, legitimated by the ballot box, are necessary. The inevitable sacrifices that will have to be undertaken by a "politically-suicidal government" (as the prime minister, Mr Yatsenyuk, warned in February), are still pending. Because, immersed in the noise and propaganda of a supposed antifascist fight in the Donbass, we have lost sight of the true origin and nature of the crisis in Ukraine, which, above and beyond questions of identity, is the desire of a majority of the citizens of the country to improve the quality of their democracy and their standard of living. To achieve this, the corruption must be cut away and the economy modernised. Ukraine's GDP per capita—in purchasing power parity—is just \$7400 while in Poland it is \$21,000, in Russia \$18,000, in Belarus \$16,000 and even in Romania it is \$14,500 USD. Reaching parity with

Poland may seem chimerical at the moment, but it is reasonable to assume that in the medium term Ukraine can at least reach Romania's level.

Nevertheless, given the urgency and the gravity of the situation on the military front, the electoral campaign will be dominated by the Donbass question and the negotiations with Russia. That is why, to avoid giving Putin the key to blocking Ukrainian politics, a proposal made by Alexander J. Motyl in Foreign Affairs has gained traction in debates among specialists. He puts forward the immediate advantages to Ukraine of a hypothetical surrender of the Donbass. Though this situation remains improbable and is one that would also present other dilemmas. Putin has already demonstrated his willingness to back the creation of a *Novorosiya* that would take up the whole of the Ukrainian coastline and connect the Crimea and Transnistria by land. From the perspective of President Poroshenko this proposal is politically unacceptable as much for sentimental reasons as because of the pressure of extreme Ukrainian nationalism and the forces of the far right, who, without intending to, and probably without even noticing, are acting once more as Putin's tactical allies in his strategy of punishing Ukraine.