

Amid warnings that Ukraine is descending into civil war, John Chisholm asks whether Kiev can hold the country together and examines the potential geopolitical repercussions if it fails

So the crisis develops. Russia has, with some predictability, reversed the decision of the 1950s and re-attached Crimea to the motherland. But now the situation has moved into a much more dangerous phase. The challenge posed by the two eastern provinces, and the desire of at least some of the people there to separate themselves from Ukraine and transfer their loyalties to Moscow, creates a much more explosive situation.

The example of Crimea has clearly inspired these separatist groups. The desire of the Russian-speaking majority of the Crimea to secede from Kiev and bring themselves under the umbrella of Moscow was an obvious move. Here, at least, there was a limited scope for objection. Up until 1954 Crimea had been part of the Russian SSR, but was transferred to Ukraine that year. In 1991, when the USSR collapsed, it remained part of Ukraine, but as an autonomous republic. The Russian move to re-incorporate Ukraine can be portrayed as the reversal of a “wrong decision” taken in 1954. Certainly this is a convenient way of making an act of naked aggression easier to swallow for the international community. For Moscow, it is simply responding as an authoritarian, nationalist, populist leadership should be expected to respond. For Kiev, it removed a potentially endless source of instability.

It is necessary to unpack these ideas one at a time, however. In the West, the “reversal” argument offered a safety valve to countries that would come under moral pressure to object to Moscow’s move. Faced with an upsurge of popular political support and the presence on the ground of what appeared to be troops from the Black Sea Fleet base at Sevastopol, it quickly became clear Kiev could not hold onto the province without violence. So the West could condemn, but only deploy limited sanctions in order to register disapproval, and then concentrate on financial and diplomatic support for the tyro regime in Kiev.

For Moscow, there was even less choice. President Putin has set his face against the liberalism – both economic and social – represented by the West. Instead, a heady brew of authoritarianism, populism (appearing on TV question-and-answer sessions, attacks on minority groups, gathering support from

conservative social forces) and nationalism (the oft-said policy to “make Russia strong again” and reverse the verdict of the Cold War) meant the regime was in no position to choose its course of action.

Acceptance of the reversal of fortune in Kiev was never on the cards.

If Russians in Crimea declared their desire to be under Moscow, then the leadership would need to respond or its pretensions to popular nationalism would be exploded.

Kiev looked like less of a winner, having had an important province wrenched away while appearing powerless to prevent it. Yet, in anything other than the short term, the loss of Crimea is a benefit. The large Russian minority, clearly unhappy and easily influenced by Moscow, was always going to be a source of political instability. It also removes a significant element of the electorate opposed to the outlook of the new regime in Kiev, making an electoral reversal of the revolution that much harder. In other words, it is an acceptance that Kiev, and the revolutionary leadership, has won.

With the outcome in Crimea decided, it seemed inevitable that the crisis would move to other pro-Moscow areas of the country, particularly the two eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhanska. This is “rust belt” territory, with heavy emphasis on coal mining and steel manufacture where the primary trade is with Russia. Donetsk is large enough to be a country in its own right, with a population of over four million, of whom about 1.8m are Russian, in a massive urban sprawl. Although the population is mostly ethnically Ukrainian, Russian is the commonly spoken language and the culture and outlook is essentially Russian. Luhanska is the easternmost province of Ukraine, with only half the population of Donetsk. Nonetheless, around 40 per cent are Russian, with many Ukrainians essentially Russified, so around 70 per cent are Russian speakers. Like Donetsk it is essentially urban and industrial, with significant coal mining and metallurgical industries. The provinces constitute the heart of the Don Basin, areas that did well from a Soviet System

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that favoured heavy smokestack industries.

Russian nationalists, along with diverse groups of supporters (Serbian neo-fascists were quick to make an appearance) have taken a leaf out of the Crimean playbook and occupied local political buildings in both provinces, setting up checkpoints and swaggering around in military fatigues with automatic weapons. They look to Moscow to support them in their pretensions. Certainly they have the numbers to form an independent country, or become part of Russia, or form independent republics under the umbrella of Moscow.

An obvious model that could be followed is the

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self-styled Republic of South Ossetia that broke away from Georgia in 1990. Today, South Ossetia effectively subsists on Russian goodwill and tourists, existing as it has since the ceasefire of 1992 in a twilight zone, with the local population demanding independence or incorporation into the Russian Federation while the rest of the international population regard it as part of Georgia. Another breakaway part of Georgia, Abkhazia, exists in a similar fashion. The war fought in 2008, when Georgia attempted to use military force to reassert control, resulted in a Russian invasion and a humiliating defeat. The war ended with Russia formally recognising South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Meanwhile Georgia, once a US poster-boy, soon dropped out of sight, and its aggressively anti-Russian president lost office.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia are joined by Transnistria and Ngorno-Karabakh as so-called "frozen conflict" zones. In effect these territories are pro-Moscow, which guarantees their independence against the former Soviet republics they have broken away from. But they are small fry by the standards of Eastern Ukraine. Abkhazia, for example, barely musters a quarter of a million inhabitants, dwarfed by Donetsk and its four million people.

So, although Donetsk and Luhanska have a possible model to follow, the challenges they pose financially are far more profound than the current collection of small fry. Moscow can afford to support them – although the country's current economic health and the state bonds might cast a shadow of doubt over that – and they can be used as credible flags to wave to the general populace. Here, Russia can pose as the protector of ethnic Russians against other republics, using its military might and control of hydrocarbons to make sure this situation is not challenged. The conflict in Georgia in 2008 demonstrated what happens if it is.

But these countries remain unrecognised by the international community, outside of the scope of international law and, crucially, international finance. These minnows can be financed by Moscow, and do not need to resort to international money markets to raise loans to invest in the country. But the eastern Oblasts of Ukraine are home to six million people, heavily urbanised and working in ailing industries. Without the ability to gain access to serious money it is hard to see any future other than incipient decline: the young will emigrate to Russia proper, or maybe drift back into the rest of Ukraine, or head for the countries of the EU. The old will remain, an increasing drain on the local economy, and the states would undoubtedly become increasingly dependent on Russian money. Using this model, the future looks bleak indeed.

But absorbing them into the Russian Federation would be a clear breach of international law. As argued above, Crimea could be explained away the reversal of a bad decision. But Donetsk and Luhanska would be a different order of magnitude: they have been part of Ukraine since the October Revolution. Tearing them off and making them part of Russia would drive a coach and horses through any argument the Russians may be using elsewhere that involves taking the moral high ground... Syria springs to mind.

But Kiev has not helped matters. The separatists in the east have shot down three helicopters, effectively captured

military vehicles and humiliated Kiev's military. Kiev forces are clearly stretched very thin. When airborne troops took and held the small civil airport of Kramatorsk, they fought off several attempts to retake it, only to eventually abandon it themselves. Kiev seems unable to muster the men to take and hold positions, relying on small raids instead. But these are not effective in helping Kiev regain political control.

Kiev has announced a resumption of conscription, and ex-Prime Minister Timoshenko has called for a civil militia to work in co-operation with the military. But these are solutions – if that they are – that will take time. The police do not seem much more effective, and were condemned by the government in Kiev for the violence and deaths that took place in Odessa on 2 May. Meanwhile Ukraine is also in the grip of a political campaign for the presidency, which could dictate how intense the next stage of the crisis becomes.

Meanwhile, both Nato and Russia have been moving additional military assets into the region. Russia has also been making ominous statements about Ukraine "using military force on the people", a narrative that would justify Russian military intervention to save ethnic Russians from the alleged depredations of Ukrainian troops. Russian troops mass over the border, Putin attends well-publicised military exercises, Russian "Bear" bombers appear over the North Sea in what appears to be a Cold War re-run.

This is undoubtedly the worst crisis between the West and Russia since the end of the USSR. Although a military confrontation between both sides is unlikely, it has already illustrated the strengths and weaknesses of both sides. The economic, social and political pull of the West against the authoritarian and nationalistic alternative of Moscow. But Moscow is forced to use harder power: the threat of military action or fuel prices. This only demonstrates the weakness of their position. Putin's alleged Slavic alternative to the West has been exposed as a corrupt, authoritarian sham. But there is one thing that politicians in the West should remember: when you see a bear, don't poke it.

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**Pro-Russian protestors
wave Russian and
Odessa flags after seizing
a police station in the
southern Ukrainian city**

