To Live and Die in Donetsk

Not that anyone would notice, but there is a disturbing and quite frankly depressing reality taking place in eastern Ukraine. While it is true the conflict that rages has been largely downplayed now and shoved off the media spotlight in the West, whatever coverage does emerge tends to be giving a relative free pass to Ukrainian police forces, special operation forces, and the military as they seek to reinstitute control over their national territory. At first glance this does not sound particularly offensive: after all, a country should have the right to protect its sovereignty and ensure that various groups do not arbitrarily try to secede. But a deeper glance reveals that the way you do this in the modern era is by killing people. And unfortunately, these casualties cannot be universally declared as enemy combatants or unlawful separatists, despite authorities in Kyiv wishing to push that very scenario to their own people and outward to the rest of us in the West. There have been many civilian casualties in eastern Ukraine over the past two months. These people simply had the unfortunate circumstance of being born and living in eastern Ukraine while having no connection whatsoever to politics in Kyiv or geopolitics in Moscow or foreign-policy strategy in Washington. And that is what reveals the sad circumstances of the civil unrest in Ukraine and how it is laden with blatant hypocrisy and the rationalization of killing.

It should be recalled that when the prospect of violence breaking out in eastern Ukraine was a major media issue in the West, approximately 3 months ago, the protests and indignation and opposition was voiced primarily under the context of expecting that violence to come from Russian military forces invading into the country. It was the assumption that the only way authorities in Kyiv would take to arms and resort to violence was if the Russians made it inevitable with their own attacks. This is clearly what has NOT happened in eastern Ukraine. Russia did not invade. Whatever Russian intelligence or special operation forces happen to be in eastern Ukraine at the moment, they are decidedly and some might say surprisingly inactive. Collecting data? Reporting back to Moscow? Absolutely. But actively being the sole forces responsible for fomenting violence and civil unrest within eastern Ukraine? Absolutely not. Just as the authorities in Kyiv misplayed their hand after the Maidan revolution, assuming all parties across the world would universally praise and support their removal of the president, they badly analyzed the situation on the ground in eastern Ukraine. In several media interviews I gave in the United States following the referendum in Crimea, I warned that the greatest possible danger in Ukraine would be civil groups in major eastern Ukrainian cities looking to Crimea as a model to emulate and at the Crimean referendum as a precedent to follow. The reason I said back then that this was the greatest danger was because it seemed to me that the relatively dull and boring aftermath in Crimea would clearly instigate local opposition groups in eastern Ukraine to follow suit. After all, why can’t these cities and regions have the same advantages and privileges that the people in Crimea just apparently earned for themselves with no violence or damage done to their region? This potential copycat effect was not only obvious, in my opinion, the consequence was equally so: authorities in Kyiv would have to act against these maneuvers, otherwise they would be basically saying to the eastern half of its country that it would be perfectly acceptable to self-disintegrate. My challenge in those media interviews was for the authorities in Kyiv: could they outmaneuver these opposition forces in eastern Ukraine without resorting to violence and bloodshed? Failing to do so seemed to be an open invitation for the Russian military to actually come in order to protect the lives of ethnic Russians. This was the irony of eastern Ukraine: no one in the West took the Russian entreaties seriously when it was said the lives of ethnic Russians needed to be protected in Crimea. How ironic, then, if it turned out that Russian
forces would end up needing to invade eastern Ukraine because ethnic Russians were in fact being killed with impunity.

But that is not what has happened. People have died in eastern Ukraine. They continue to die in eastern Ukraine. They die largely because of one side’s forces. But those forces are not Russian. And here in the West there is basically silence. There is no indignation. There is no wringing of hands. There is no renting of garments. Apparently, the killing of people in eastern Ukraine is only disturbing to the West if it happens at the hands of the Russian military rather than at the hands of Ukrainian forces. Yes it is true that civilians always die in war and that civil unrest often results, historically speaking, with many civilians being killed in the crossfire between opposition groups and loyalists. I am not naïve to these basic facts in the history of war. But what is sadly disappointing is to see so many countries that were lined up to make sure conflict did not erupt in eastern Ukraine when it was thought said conflict would come from the Russians, now see those same countries basically turn the other cheek and turn their media cameras away from the bloodshed and the slaughter of these very same people simply because the flag doing the killing is yellow and blue instead of white, blue, and red. I doubt that the people of eastern Ukraine feel that it is an atrocity to die by a Russian bullet but an acceptable loss to die by a Ukrainian one. Unfortunately, it seems that certain governmental and media groups in the West have made that very conclusion and therefore we see the quiet continuation of violence in the name of sovereignty and territorial integrity. To live and die in Donetsk is indeed a cynical web of global geopolitics.

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