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Russia/Ukraine

# A “step backwards” from Putin?

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**After a long historical excursus on the tsarist empire, the evolution of the USSR and Lenin's “mistake” of having granted too much autonomy to the “national realities” on Russian territory, yesterday [21 February] Vladimir Putin announced his decision to recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics in the Donbass. [1]** This decision was promptly followed by the dispatch of peacekeeping troops into the eastern territories of Ukraine, which were de facto detached from the central government during the events of 2014-2015. The scenarios that open up are many and uncertain. Certainly what is happening in these hours represents the most concrete evolution since the beginning of the “crisis” in Eastern Europe, which until now had been played out mainly on a level of diplomatic demands and threatening strategic moves. The Minsk agreements - which, although not respected by either side, were the only framework within which it was possible to seek a negotiated solution to the situation in the Donbass - have been completely torn up. Ukraine says it does not want to give up any of its land, while the EU and the US have started sanctions against Russia.

And yet, it is not certain that we are not facing a sort of de-escalation, a “softening” of the conflict or at least its scaling down to a more local and less vast scale than it might have seemed before. Francisco Brusa talked about this with Russian political scientist and activist Ilya Budraitskis.

### **Did you expect such a speech from Putin?**

The basic logic expressed by Putin in this speech was to effectively deny the very existence of Ukraine on historical grounds, i.e. to claim that it is an “artificial nation”. Ukraine, in its present form, would be nothing more than a consequence of Lenin's mistakes. And this constitutes, according to Putin, the basis not only for launching a hypothetical war against the neighbouring country, but even for “annihilating” it as an entity in its own right: precisely because its existence is not justifiable either by current conditions or by historical developments.

Starting from here, in a somewhat strange way, Putin therefore arrived at the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics, a sign that his speech also had other facets and ambitions. There are indeed rumours that the speech was prepared before yesterday's occasion with the intention of justifying a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, while the conclusion was changed in the run-up to highlight this (evidently more recent) decision to give full recognition to the Donbass republics.

Interestingly, Putin's speech focused almost exclusively on the past, but little or nothing was said about the future, either with respect to the independent republics or what the Russian population should expect. So we have to ask ourselves what this recognition actually means. I think it is a move on Putin's part to further certify and safeguard a situation that is already in place. On the other hand, in Donetsk and Luhansk there are institutions that are *de facto* independent of Kiev, there are Russian troops on the territory and the Minsk agreements have never been put into practice. So the Russian president recognizes this state of affairs.

### **What could change?**

From the point of view of those who live in the territories of the independent republics - who find themselves caught between the fires of both sides and without the implementation of the Minsk agreements - this recognition could represent something positive. However, the situation of non-recognition that has continued so far is certainly something negative from their point of view: I believe that most of the people are hoping to finally be integrated into a

state form, be it Ukraine or Russia. It is no coincidence that many of the inhabitants of the Donbass have moved to one side or the other. I think that what is at stake for them is not independence, but the possibility of becoming full citizens of an existing state: we are not dealing with a particular minority, but with a group of people with a mixed identity.

And on the other hand, in the last eight years the idea of an independent republic has lost considerable popularity and legitimacy: the leaders of the pro-independence movements have disappeared from the scene (some killed, others removed from their positions and forced to leave the republics); from many of the comments that the inhabitants of Donetsk and Luhansk have posted on the Internet during the recent escalation it is clear that they do not trust the authorities there.

Obviously, Putin's recognition means the final conclusion of the Minsk agreements, the end of the idea that there was an internal conflict in Ukraine and that an agreement could be reached between the government in Kiev and the self-proclaimed authorities in Donbass. So the central question concerns the form that relations between these territories and Ukraine will take. From Kiev's point of view, Russia's recognition of the independence of the Donbass (the formal recognition, I insist, of what has been a fact for years) could paradoxically represent something useful. In fact, Kiev is not willing to fully reintegrate Donetsk and Luhansk because this is a region that now lacks infrastructure and whose population is clearly not “friendly”. Moreover, Ukraine's position has always been that it does not want to deal with the authorities of the independent republics, since they have always denied the “civil war” nature of those events, interpreting it as a clash between their country and Russia.

### **What then comes to Putin's mind?**

I think that from the Russian president's point of view yesterday's decision represented a sort of “step backwards”. If we recall the demands made on NATO last December, Putin's underlying desire was to be an equal partner with the United States on global security issues. Now, however, the dynamics are recomposing themselves within a local dimension, which is that of the Donbass. Some say that this is even a “shift of focus” agreed, or at least discussed, in advance with Macron and Scholz (with whom Putin had conversations the day before yesterday). For the Russian president, this may be a very advantageous way out of the crisis: he can present his people with a de-escalation of the conflict, but it is also a kind of victory, a territorial conquest of the country.

### **What are the reactions in Russia?**

I think Putin is convinced that a large part of the Russian population genuinely cares about the “imperial” fate of their country and therefore wants a more powerful position on the international scene. However, I believe there is a discrepancy. According to the polls, it seems clear that the attention of most people in Russia today is directed towards domestic rather than global issues: the economic crisis, inflation (much exacerbated, it should not be forgotten, by the escalation of recent times)... And above all, the polls show that about 60% of people are afraid of war.

So I think that with the decision to recognize the independence of the Donbass republics, Putin can present his citizens with some sort of victory, or evidence that we are defending the Russian populations across the border, and at the same time show how the risks of a heated conflict are being reduced. However, while there is a consensus on the feeling of fear, there is a great deal of disagreement on the interpretations of the nature of this war: some think it is a NATO attack, others a personal initiative by Putin, etc.

**In his speech, the Russian president basically accused the Ukrainian elites of being puppets in the hands of others...**

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Obviously, this approach by Putin is wrong and totally dangerous in terms of international relations. Given these premises, one can go on and on: following his logic, one can say that the Baltic republics do not exist and that they are only puppets in the hands of NATO, just as Italy itself is completely in the hands of Atlantic interests, etc. etc. In practice, Putin recognizes the full sovereignty and legitimacy of dialogue only of the United States and would like to negotiate and discuss any issue with them, without recognising as interlocutors those same countries whose future is perhaps being decided (see Ukraine).

His rhetorical strategy seems to be pushing towards a sort of "de-subjectivization" and delegitimization of the East European national realities. During the meeting of the Security Council (perhaps the most influential institutional body in Russia) that preceded Putin's address, the head of the National Guard, Zolotov, claimed that Russia's western border is not with Ukraine but directly with the US.

*Added to this was the emphasis on “de-communization”...*

Putin expressed a very clear historical vision of how Russian reality should be conceived according to him: according to this vision, the Russian Empire represented a positive reality, Russia (including Ukraine) came from there and Lenin made a big mistake because he created the various national republics. He created them because he had some utopian and revolutionary ideas that were completely wrong and still create problems in the present.

But after Lenin there was Stalin who, in this sense, was more effective because he governed the USSR in a more centralized way. What he did not do, however, was to formalize this centralization in the Constitution, on the basis of which the nationalist elites relied to gain independence when the USSR collapsed, with the mere intention of grabbing power.

These are ideas that Putin has been expressing for some years now and, in any case, this negative attitude towards the figure of Lenin is worrying: when he speaks of “real de-communization”, the Russian president could also mean that delegitimization of the communist ideology in our country on the horizon.

### **Is there any dissent from this line?**

In Russia now the possibilities of expressing dissent are very limited. Demonstrations are basically illegal. There have actually been a few demonstrations against the war in Ukraine, but they have only been a few dozen people in Moscow or St Petersburg. I think the reason for such low participation is not because of a general acceptance of our country's moves in Ukraine or in general, but because most people simply do not have a clear idea of what is happening.

The official media give very confusing interpretations: on the one hand they say that Ukraine is an enemy, on the other hand that Russia is a peaceful nation and therefore does not intend in any way to exacerbate the conflict, but at the same time they say that the independence of the Donbass republics must be guaranteed even at the cost of military intervention, and so on. In short, it is really hard to understand who is attacking whom and for what reasons, and therefore to position oneself politically.

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*Interview by Francisco Brusa for [Press Dinamo](#).*

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[1] *The Guardian*, 22 February 2022. [“Putin’s rambling Ukraine speech leaves western diplomats scrambling”](#). IVP