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Ukraine

Between peace and war

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Three months after the signing of the Minsk-2 agreements, it is clear that the road to peace still seems very long. Ukraine today is characterized by very strong contrasts between the majority of the country, which has not experienced war, and the Donbass, where since April 2014 the forces of Kiev have confronted pro-Russian separatists, powerfully aided by Russia.

The Donbass, a zone disputed by both parties, has known since the cease-fire a very uneasy calm. When you enter the "zone of counter-terrorist operations" (ATO - this is how Kiev describes the military operations against the separatists) you realize the bitterness of the clashes. More than 6,000 dead - without knowing the losses of the pro-Russian separatists and of the Russian soldiers who came to lend a helping hand from the end of August – bear witness to the intensity of the fighting. Yet even in the part controlled by Kiev (about 60 per cent of Donbass), the traces of battle are undeniable. Life has resumed its course, but everyone knows that war can resume quickly. And clashes do resume regularly: shortly after our departure from the "front line" near Slovyansk, separatists started shooting again...

In fact, since nothing has been settled politically, the chances of prolonging this situation of "neither war nor peace" appear pretty slim. After the loss of Crimea, Kiev cannot bring itself to accept that of Donetsk and Luhansk, the two cities in the hands of pro-Russian separatists. The separatists, who want to seize the port of Mariupol, should, unless there are unexpected developments, go on the offensive quickly. Because according to them, their "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk are not viable without access to the sea...

There is something that is absolutely obvious: without the Russian intervention at the end of August 2014, when the separatists were being routed, the military conflict would have been over a long time ago.

Today the game is very uneven. The separatists have far more powerful weapons than the Ukrainian forces. Faced with the Russian war machine, which is running at full blast to provide the necessary support for the separatists, it is clear that what has allowed Kyiv to avoid a total disaster it is the spirit of the combatants, among others the volunteers, without whom the war would have been lost long ago. The Maidan generation, which brought down former President Yanukovich, remobilized as soon as the pro-Russian separatists started taking over several towns and cities in the Donbass. The morale of the volunteers on the front line remains very high, even though their armament is derisory faced with the separatists.

As Oleg Zontov, mayor of Slovyansk, the main city recaptured by Kiev from the separatists, said to us: "Here we aspire above all to peace, but everyone is afraid that the separatists are trying to recapture the town and this time they are seeking to control the whole of the Donbass. Which they have so far failed to do. European countries do not understand that what happens here concerns the whole of Europe, because Moscow now wants to forcibly redraw new frontiers."

The errors of the Kiev authorities after the fall of Yanukovich - such as the decision adopted the day after the departure of the ousted president to ban Russian as the second official language, whereas it is the language spoken by the majority of the inhabitants of the Donbass - have largely favoured the projects of the separatist oligarchs.

We do not see today the bases for an agreement. The Ukrainian government, which is facing a more than difficult economic situation, is advancing only slowly along the path of democratic reforms. The situation is even more complex because at present there is no progressive party in Ukraine capable of bringing together a large number of Ukrainians on the basis of an anti-capitalist platform, or even one that is just clearly anti-oligarchic. Ukraine is sorely

lacking in trade unions that are really independent of the very powerful economic lobbies in this country.

Democratization will be real only when the Ukrainian state is able to put an end to the power of the oligarchs, who have up to now acted to prevent any reform that goes in the direction of greater social justice. These oligarchs naturally contribute to the corruption that, as in Russia, is found at all levels of society. There is a beginning of a struggle against the oligarchs in Ukraine, but for now Kiev has not yet managed to take a decisive step in dismantling the oligarchic power that has controlled everything since the independence of Ukraine in 1991. There is enormous resistance to any attempt at reform.

Maidan was a great spontaneous popular movement, whatever may be said about it, but it was then partially taken over by those who have only one goal: to prevent the end of oligarchic power. Nevertheless more and more Ukrainians aspire to do away with the oligarchs and with corruption in order to see the country take the road of democratic reforms. For now, with a Russia that is doing everything it can to make it impossible for there to be democratic change in Ukraine, it is hard to be optimistic in the short term.

It is unfortunately likely that the trials and tribulations are not over for Ukraine and its people, the vast majority of whom want to live in peace and with dignity, "like everyone else". In Slovyansk, although the majority of the population watches Russian television, whose lying propaganda is very effective and very professional, people have lived already under the rule of the separatists. They do not want to recommence this experience, which was terrible for them, even though they repeat Russian propaganda about the Kiev authorities. At the same time, they live from day to day, without plans for the future: "Why renovate my home? Tomorrow I might have to flee from the war..." says a friend who is putting us up.

On April 22, back in Lviv, a major city in western Ukraine, we met the mayor, Andriy Sadovyi, leader of Samopomich ("Self-help"), a formation that created a surprise in the parliamentary elections in October 2014, obtaining over 11 per cent of the vote [1]. Noting that the country's unity is being challenged at present by the annexation of Crimea and the occupation by Russian forces of part of the Ukrainian Donbass, in support of the separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk, he believes that in the first place "it is crucial to succeed in re-establishing Ukraine's control over these territories." According to him, "the present truce is extremely fragile."

"The problem - he says - is that Moscow does not recognize its active involvement in the Ukrainian Donbass, which makes things very complicated. We can see clearly that the Minsk-2 agreements are still not being implemented. Moreover, I regret that the contact group which is responsible for trying to bring the Russian and Ukrainian viewpoints closer involves only Germany and France, and not the United States, which has significant influence in the world. The world is in a situation of great fragility due to the questioning by Moscow of the territorial integrity of an independent European country. Everyone knows that Russian military equipment crosses the borders of our country in large quantities and that thousands of Russian soldiers are in the Donbass.

In this situation it is difficult to advance quickly on the path of the reforms that are necessary to make Ukraine a country that is capable of joining the European Union. We must follow a difficult path, but I am optimistic in spite of the current situation. There are young people who have emerged in politics since the last elections and who want real change: to end the influence of the oligarchs who have put a stranglehold not only on the economy but also on political life. There is no alternative but to go forward. Since at present there is no alternative to the government coalition, it is from the inside that we must pursue the efforts to consolidate democracy, to face up to the consequences of the war that Russia is imposing on us and to carry out the necessary reforms. We will never accept a Ukraine that is amputated of part of the Donbass and Crimea."

We can clearly see: a firm stand against Russia.

We will talk more in the future about Sadovyi, who with his movement Samopomich wants to conduct politics differently. Because that is attractive to many young Ukrainians.

May 2015

[1] See on this subject, Vincent Pr sumey, "Political information on Ukraine on 27 October 2014":

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