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THE TRAGEDY OF FLIGHT MH 17: How Far Is Putin Prepared to Go?

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It would seem that Putin has lost control in the Donbass crisis. Time is now against him. It is becoming clearer by the day that the Kremlin has some responsibility in the shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 or, at the very least, has failed to cooperate in bringing pressure to bear on pro-Russian rebels – who are the masters on the ground – in order to get them to cooperate with an independent investigation instead of placing obstacles in the way and spoiling evidence in the area where the catastrophe occurred. Accordingly, Russia's stance has come increasingly under question in the international arena. The longer the present phase of the conflict is dragged out, the slimmer the Kremlin's chances of achieving its goals in Ukraine will be. However, this does not necessarily augur a speedy end to the armed conflict. Unless Moscow totally withdraws its support for the rebels the most likely scenario is, in fact, rapid worsening of the present situation.

Indeed, the conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk cannot be understood unless the Kremlin's involvement is taken into account. The degree of effective control wielded by the Kremlin over the pro-Russian insurgents is debatable but the latter's dependence on supplies and support from Russia is not. It has been demonstrated that the main leaders of the rebellion in Donbass are Russian citizens who are closely linked with the Russian intelligence services. It is no coincidence that it has only been possible to keep the rebellion going in areas adjoining Russia, which is why border control is one of the Ukrainian government's biggest headaches. A frontier zone, extending more than a hundred kilometres over which Kiev presently has no control, constitutes the likeliest explanation as to how it was possible to set up, inside the rebel stronghold, the BUK surface-to-air missile system which shot down the Malaysia Airlines commercial flight with 298 people on board.

Hopes for a swift pacification of Donbass – the selfsame area in eastern Ukraine where the armed conflict is occurring – as a result of the missile attack on flight MH 17 are based on the idea that international pressure on Putin could lead him to withdraw his support for the insurgents, and thus pave the way for a negotiated agreement: a reasonable but improbable supposition. Western pressure alone will not be sufficient to make Putin act and, in spite of the Russian Federation's

annexation of Crimea, he still has the lifeline held out by the BRIC countries, China in particular.

Besides, outside criticism is not backed by internal pressure since most Russian people – thanks to the Kremlin’s iron-fisted control over the media – accept the official story about the Ukraine crisis, including the latest chapter concerning the Malaysia Airlines flight. As is well known, the conflict in Ukraine is not undermining Putin’s popularity. On the contrary. Then again, the international response has not been unanimous and European countries continue to be divided in their relations with Russia, which is a big asset as far as Moscow’s strategy is concerned.

Kiev has been gaining ground over the past few weeks and now seems ready to make the most of the present situation by wasting no time in dealing a lethal blow to the pro-Russian insurgent forces. A sharp escalation of the conflict is therefore the most likely outcome. If the insurgents do not have Russia’s support it is possible that Kiev could win this round quite quickly, but at the price of inflicting unacceptable suffering on civilians who are trapped in the middle of the conflict. Regaining control of Donbass is not only a military matter. It is also a political question. Unlike Moscow, Kiev has to think about the day after, once peace is achieved.

The context, then, would not seem to favour any fast peace agreement unless Moscow’s chief goal is recognised, at least in part. This is not, as the Kremlin’s oft-repeated story would have it, the “situation of the Russian-speaking minorities”, but strategic control over Ukraine and its foreign relations. Nonetheless, the situation is not an easy one for Putin and there is a certain degree of improvisation in the way he is handling it. Furthermore, his strategy in southern and eastern Ukraine – his attempt to create a supposed *Novorossiya* (New Russia) – has failed. There has been no large-scale mass uprising calling for Russia’s protective intervention and neither has there been any widespread active support for the insurgents from the local population, which means that the Kremlin has been obliged to send weapons and veteran combatants from Russia. The fact that the rebels were provided with such a sophisticated surface-to-air missile system as BUK in order to counter Ukrainian forces in air space as well on the ground might suggest that the Kremlin was aiming at least for entrenchment of the conflict with a view to exerting permanent pressure on Kiev. The shooting down of flight MH 17 by the insurgents, most probably in error, has totally changed the state of play.

It is unlikely, however, that once it has recovered from the shock, the Kremlin would completely abandon the pro-Russian rebels, although uncertainty as to how far Putin will be willing to go is a question that will continue to beset Europeans. For the moment, Putin’s most obvious support comes from Russian public opinion, especially Russian nationalists who, in their present moment of glory, are calling for a more direct and forceful Russian intervention in Ukraine. The Russian president might end up being a captive rather than lord of the neo-imperialist fervour that the Kremlin has been whipping up by since the occupation of Crimea.

Putin’s number one concern is his own image and that of Russia in the world. Becoming a pariah is not part of his plan. Yet, in the balance of costs and benefits, any acknowledgment, however partial or limited it may be, of Russia’s responsibility in the tragedy of flight MH 17 would also entail recognising that Putin has lost control of the situation. This is hardly compatible with the strong-leader image he has spent years cultivating for both domestic and foreign consumption.