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Putin's Ukrainian Judo | The Vineyard of the Saker

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By [Dmitry Orlov](#) and posted with special permission

A terrible war is about to erupt on Russia's border with the Ukraine—or not—but there is some likelihood of a significant number of people getting killed before project Ukraine is finally over. Given that around 13 thousand people have been killed over the past seven years—the civil war in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine has gone on for that long!—this is no laughing matter. But people get desensitized to the mostly low-level warfare. Just over the past couple of weeks a grandfather was shot by a Ukrainian sniper while feeding his chickens and a young boy was killed by a bomb precision-dropped on him from a Ukrainian drone.

But what's about to happen now is forecasted to be on a different scale: the Ukrainians are moving heavy armor and troops up to the line of separation while the Russians are moving theirs up to their side of the Ukrainian border, a position from which they can blast any and all Ukrainian troops straight out of the gene pool without so much as setting foot on Ukrainian territory—should they wish to do so. The Russians can justify their military involvement by the

need to defend their own citizens: over the past seven years half a million residents in eastern Ukraine have applied for and been granted Russian citizenship. But how exactly can Russia defend its citizens while they are stuck in the crossfire between Russian and Ukrainian forces?

The rationale of defending its citizens led to conflict in the briefly Georgian region of South Ossetia, which started on August 8, 2008 and lasted barely a week, leaving Georgia effectively demilitarized. Russia rolled in, Georgia's troops ran off, Russia confiscated some of the more dangerous war toys and rolled out. Georgia's paper warriors and their NATO consultants and Israeli trainers were left wiping each others' tears. Any suggestion of arming and equipping the Georgians since then has been met with groaning and eye-rolling. Is the upcoming event in eastern Ukraine going to be similar to the swift and relatively painless defanging of Georgia in 2008? Given that the two situations are quite different, it seems foolish to think that the approach to resolving them would be the same.

Is it different this time and is World War III is about to erupt with eastern Ukraine being used as a trigger for this conflagration? Do the various statements made at various times by Vladimir Putin provide a solid enough basis for us to guess at what will happen next? Is there a third, typically, infuriatingly Russian approach to resolving this situation, where Russia wins, nobody dies and everyone in the West is left scratching their heads?

The Ukrainian military is much like everything else currently found in the Ukraine—the railway system, the power plants, the pipeline systems, the ports, the factories (the few that are left)—a patched-up hold-over from Soviet times. The troops are mostly unhappy,

demoralized conscripts and reservists. Virtually all of the more capable young men have either left the country to work abroad or have bribed their way out of being drafted. The conscripts sit around getting drunk, doing drugs and periodically taking pot shots into and across the line of separation between Ukrainian-held and separatist-held territories. Most of the casualties they suffer are from drug and alcohol overdoses, weapons accidents, traffic accidents caused by driving drunk and self-harm from faulty weapons. The Ukrainian military is also working on winning a Darwin award for the most casualties caused by stepping on their own land mines. As for the other side, many of the casualties are civilians wounded and killed by constant shelling from the Ukrainian side of the front, which runs quite close to population centers.

The Ukrainian military has received some new weapons from the US and some NATO training, but as the experience in Georgia has shown, that won't help them. Most of these weapons are obsolete, non-updated versions of Soviet armaments from former East Bloc but currently NATO nations such as Bulgaria. These really aren't of much use against an almost fully rearmed Russian military. A lot of the Ukrainian artillery is worn out and, given that Ukrainian industry (what's left of it) is no longer able to manufacture gun barrels, artillery shells or even mortar rounds, this makes the Ukrainian military quite literally the gang that can't shoot straight. It's a great day for them if they manage to hit a kindergarten or a maternity clinic and most of the time they are just cratering up the empty countryside and littering it up with charred, twisted metal.

In addition to the hapless conscripts and reservists there are also some volunteer battalions that consist of hardcore Ukrainian

nationalists. Their minds have been carefully poisoned by nationalist propaganda crafted thanks to large infusions of foreign (mostly American) money. Some of them have been conditioned to think that it was the ancient Ukrs who built the Egyptian pyramids and dug the Black Sea (and piled the left-over dirt to build the Caucasus mountain range). These may or may not be more combat-capable than the rest (opinions vary) but, much more importantly, they are a political force that the government cannot ignore because they can quite literally hold it hostage. They have been known for stunts such as shelling the offices of a television channel whose editorial policies they found disagreeable and physically assaulting a busload of opposition activists.

It is these Ukro-Nazi zealots that stand directly in the way of any peaceful settlement of the situation in eastern Ukraine and an inevitable eventual rapprochement between the Ukrainians and Russia. There is a deep and abiding irony in that these über-antisemitic Ukro-Nazis are about to be ordered into battle against Russia by a Jewish comedian (Vladimir Zelensky, president) who got elected thanks to a Jewish oligarch (Igor “Benny” Kolomoisky). Are they going to be annihilated? Quite possibly, yes. Will their annihilation make Ukraine and the world a better place? You be the judge. To the Russians these Nazi battalions are just a bunch of terrorists and, as Putin famously put it, it is up to him to send terrorists to God and then it is up to God to decide what to do with them. But there is a more efficient strategy: let them remain somebody else’s problem. After all, these Nazi battalions have almost zero ability to threaten Russia. Eventually the Europeans will realize that the Ukraine must be denazified, at their own expense, of course, with Russia offering advice and moral support.

To understand where this Ukrainian nationalist menace came from without venturing too far down the memory hole, it is enough to appreciate the fact that at the end of World War II some number of Ukrainian war criminals who fought on the side of the Nazis and took part in acts of genocide against Ukrainian Jews and Poles found a welcoming home in the US and in Canada, where they were able to feather their nests and bring up the next several generations of Ukrainian Nazis. After the collapse of the USSR, they were reintroduced into the Ukraine and given political support in the hopes of thoroughly alienating the Ukraine from Russia. In the course of serial color revolutions and unending political upheaval and strife they were able to become prominent, then dominant, in Ukrainian political life, to a point that they can now hold the Ukrainian government hostage whenever it fails to be sufficiently belligerent toward Russia, to maintain strict anti-Russian censorship in the media and to physically threaten anyone who voices disagreement with them.

Russophobia and belligerence toward Russia are, in turn, all that is currently required of the Ukraine by its US and EU masters, who wish to portray the Ukraine as a bulwark against a supposedly aggressive Russia but in reality wish to use it as an anti-Russian irritant and to use it to contain (meaning to restrict and frustrate) Russia economically and geopolitically. To this end the Ukrainian school curriculum has been carefully redesigned to inculcate hatred of all things Russian. The Ukraine's Western mentors think that they are constructing a pseudo-ethnic totalitarian cult that can be used as a battering ram against Russia, along the lines of Nazi Germany but with much tighter external political control, or, to use a more recent, updated CIA playbook, along the lines of Al Qaeda

and its various offshoots in the Middle East.

The rationale that's used to serve up all this is "countering Russian aggression." But it is inaccurate to describe Russia as aggressive. It is much closer to the truth to describe it as, by turns, assimilative, protective and insouciant. It is assimilative in that you too can apply for a Russian citizenship based on a number of criteria, the most important of which is cultural: you need to speak Russian, and to do so convincingly you have to assimilate culturally. If an entire Russian-speaking region starts waving the Russian tricolor at rallies, singing the Russian anthem and then holds a referendum where a convincing majority votes to rejoin Russia (97% in Crimea in 2014), then Russia will annex that territory and defend it. And if lots of people in a Russian-speaking region individually apply for Russian citizenship, swear allegiance to Russia and are issued Russian passports, then Russia will try to defend them individually against attack.

All would be sweetness and light with this scheme of voluntary accession if certain Russian regions didn't periodically start demanding independence or if the Russians themselves didn't periodically shed their self-important and ungrateful dependents. As this has happened, Russia has granted them sovereignty, which, more often than not, they didn't know what to do with. At various times, Russia has freely bestowed national sovereignty on a whole slew of countries: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, the Ukraine, Moldova, Bulgaria, Rumania, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan... For some of them, it granted them sovereignty several times over (Poland seems to be the prize-winner in that category). The political elites of these countries, having become used to

suckling at Mother Russia's ample bosom, naturally look for someone new to invade and/or liberate them and then to feed them.

After the collapse of the USSR, their new masters naturally became the US and the EU. But as these newly sovereign nations soon found out, not as much milk has flowed in their direction from their new masters, and some of them have started casting furtive glances toward Russia again. The twentieth century was a confusing time for many of these countries, and many of them are puzzled to this day as to whether at any given time they were being occupied or liberated by Russia. Let us consider, as a mini case study, the three Baltic mini-nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. With the exception of the Lithuanians, who had their 15 minutes of fame during their brief late-medieval dalliance with Poland, these three ethnic groups never made good candidates for sovereign nations. They were first dominated by the Germans, then by the Swedes.

Then Peter the Great purchased their lands from the Swedes with silver coin, but after that they continued to toil as serfs for their German landlords. But then in mid-19th century the Russian Empire abolished serfdom, starting with Estonian and Latvian serfs as an experiment. It then introduced compulsory schooling, wrote down the local languages, and invited the more promising native sons to come and study at St. Petersburg. This started them on the way toward developing a national consciousness, and what a headache that turned out to be!

While the Russian Empire held together they remained under control, but after the Russian Revolution they gained independence and swiftly turned fascist. As World War II neared,

the Soviet leadership became justifiably concerned over having little pro-Nazi fascist states right on their border and occupied/liberated them. But then as the Germans advanced and the Red Army retreated, they were re-occupied by the fascists/liberated from the communists. But then as the Germans retreated and the Red Army advanced, they were re-occupied/re-liberated again and became, for a time, exemplary Soviet Communists.

And so they remained, occupied/liberated, being stuffed full of Soviet-built schools, hospitals, factories, roads, bridges, ports, railways and other infrastructure—until the USSR collapsed. They were the first to demand independence, singing songs and holding hands across all three republics. Since then they have squandered all of their Soviet inheritance and have progressively shed population while serving as playgrounds for NATO troops who get a special thrill, I suppose, by training right on Russia's border. Their political elites made a tidy little business of Russophobia, which pleased their new Western masters but gradually wrecked their economies. Having reached their peak during the late Soviet era, they are now hollow shells of their former selves.

And now, lo and behold, an embarrassingly large chunk of their populations is pining after the good old Soviet days and wants better relations with Russia (which, in the meantime, seems to have largely forgotten that these Baltic statelets even exist). Their political elites would want nothing more than for Russia to occupy/liberate them again, because then they could be rid of their noisome constituents and move to London or Geneva, there to head up a government in exile and work on plans for the next round of occupation/liberation.

To their horror, they are now realizing that Russia has no further use for them, while their new masters at the EU are sinking into a quagmire of their own problems, leaving them abandoned with no kind master to care for them and to feed them. They thought they had signed up to administer a vibrant new democracy using free money from the EU, but instead they are now stuck administering a depopulating, economically stagnant backwater peopled by ethnic relicts. In eras past, they would have only had to wait until the next wave of barbarian invasion from the east. The barbarians would slaughter all the men, rape and/or kidnap all the prettier women, and the naturally recurring process of ethnogenesis would start again. But now there are a dozen time zones of Russia to their east and no hope at all of any more barbarian invasions, so all they can do is drink a lot and, by turns, curse the Russians and the Europeans.

The situation is much the same throughout Eastern Europe, in a great arc of semi-sovereign, pseudo-sovereign and (in the case of the Ukraine) faux-sovereign nations from the Baltic to the Black Sea and on to the Caspian Sea and beyond. The many serial occupations/liberations have given their political elites a wonderful weathercock-like quality: one moment they are wearing Nazi insignia and heiling Hitler and the next moment they are good Soviet Communists reciting the 10 Commandments of the Builders of Communism. The Ukraine (getting back to it, finally) is no different in this respect but different in another: by no stretch of the imagination is it even a nation, or a combination, assemblage or grouping of nations; it is, strictly speaking, an accidental territorial agglomeration. As a failed attempt to create a monoethnic nation-state it is a chimera.

The following map, labeled “Dynamics of agglomeration of Ukrainian territories,” shows the process in detail. The toponym “Ukraine” (“Ukraina”) is most likely of Polish origin, meaning “border zone,” and it seems to have first become a thing in 1653 when the red-colored region below decided that it had had enough of Polish Catholic dominance and discrimination (its inhabitants being Orthodox Christians) and chose to rejoin Russia. The region became known as Malorossia, or Little Russia, and the yellow-colored districts were added to it over time. And then, after the Russian Revolution, came the big gift: Malorossia and neighboring districts were formed into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, and to make it something more than just a rural backwater Lenin saw it fit to lump in with it a number of Russian regions shaded in blue. It was this mistake that paved the way to the current impasse in what is but by all rights should never have been eastern Ukraine.

Then, right before, and again right after World War II Stalin lumped in the green-shaded western districts, which were previously part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its inhabitants were Austrian, Polish, Hungarian, Rumanian and most of the rest, though initially Russian, had spent five centuries under foreign rule and spoke a distinctive, archaic dialect that served as the basis for creating the synthetic language now known as Ukrainian, while the rest of what is now Ukraine spoke Russian, Yiddish and a wide assortment of village dialects. It was this alienated group that was used as leavening to fashion a synthetic Ukrainian nationalism. In turn, Ukrainian Bolshevik leaders used this faux-nationalism to fashion the Ukraine into a regional power center within the USSR.

And then came the final mistake when Nikita Khrushchev, very

much a product of the Ukrainian regional power center, paid it back for helping to promote him to the top job by giving it Russian Crimea—a move that was illegal under the Soviet constitution which was in effect at that time and a prime example of late Bolshevik political corruption that was undone in 2014 with great jubilation.

Динамика прирастания территорий Украины



There are those who think that the solution to the Ukrainian problem is to take the Ukraine apart the same way it was put together. Behold the following map. Moving east to west, we have the Russian tricolor over Crimea (the only factual bit so far), then the flag of Novorussia covering all those territories that were arbitrarily lumped into the newly created Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic by Lenin in 1922. Further west we have the flag of the state of Ukraine. And to the west is the flag of the Right Sector, a nationalist party with distinct Nazi tendencies that is currently

active in Ukrainian politics.

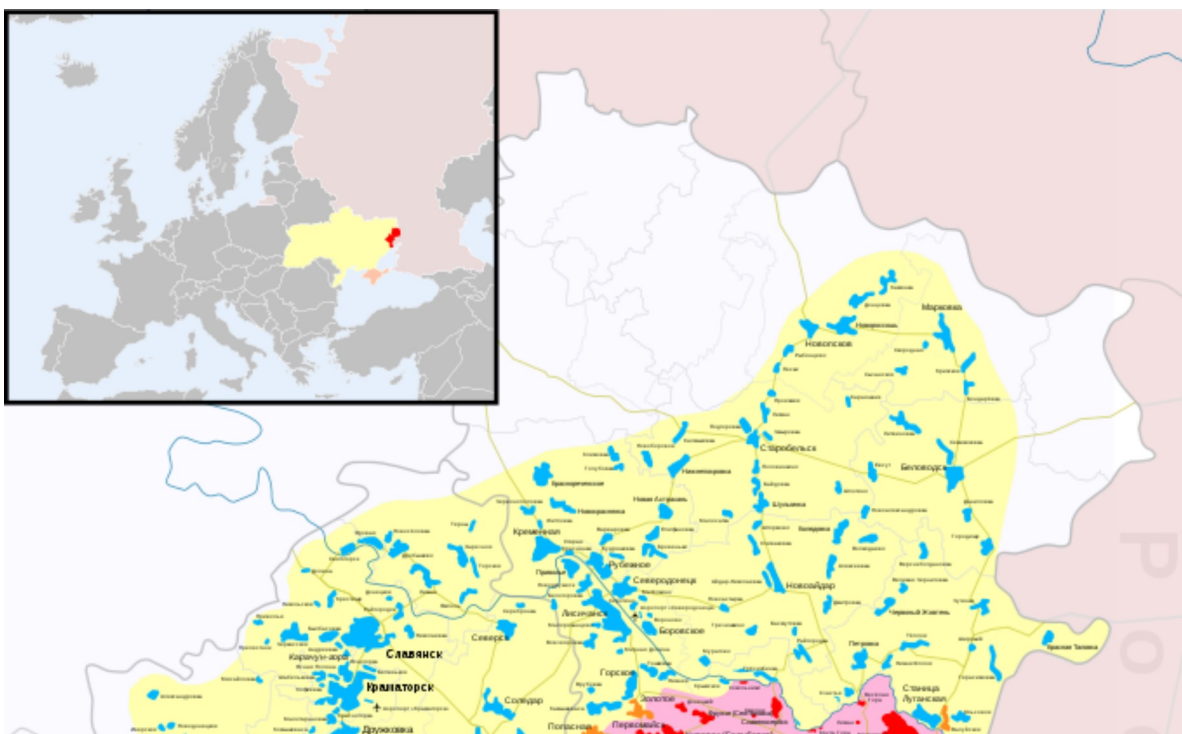


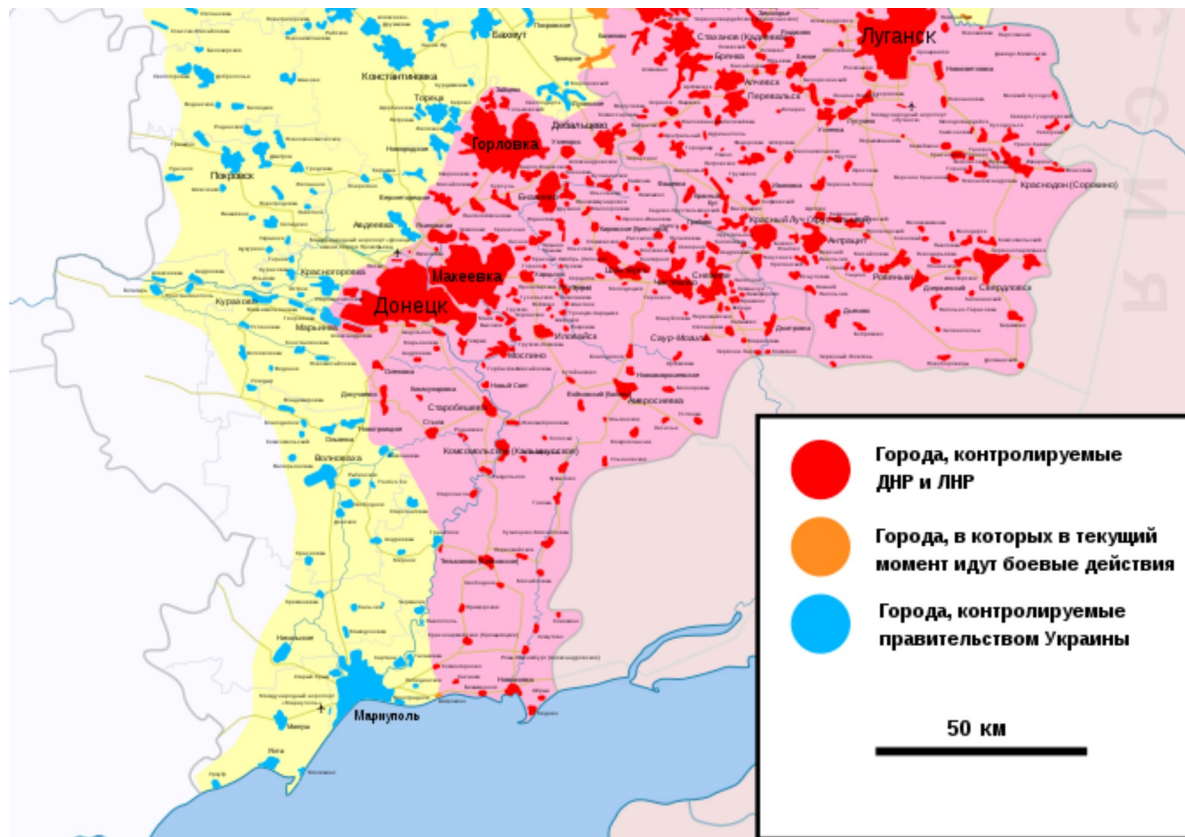
I believe that, with the exception of Crimea, this map may very well turn out to be complete and utter nonsense. It seems outlandish to think that the Ukrainian Humpty-Dumpty, which is in the process of being knocked off the wall most unceremoniously by just about everyone, including Russia, the EU and the US, is going to break apart into such tidy, historically justifiable pieces. For one thing, national borders don't matter so much any more once you are east of the Russian border, all of Europe now being one big unhappy mess. With millions of Ukrainians trying to eke out a living by working in Russia, or Poland, or further West, the distinctions between the various bits of the Ukrainian territory they are from are just not that meaningful to anyone.

For another, all of the Ukraine is now owned by the same bunch of oligarchs whose fortunes are tightly integrated with those of transnational corporations and of Western financial institutions.

None of them care at all about the people that once inhabited this region and their varied histories and linguistic preferences. They care about translating economic and financial control directly into political control with a minimum of diplomatic politesse. The Ukraine has been in the process of being stripped bare of anything valuable for 30 years now, up to and including its fertile soil, and once there is nothing left to loot it will be abandoned as a wild field, largely uninhabited.

But we are not quite there yet, and for now the only map that really matters is the following one, which shows the two separatist regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, collectively known as Donbass, short for Donetsk Basin, a prolific coal province that was mainly responsible for fueling the Ukraine's former industrial might, which to this day continues to produce anthracite, a valuable, energy-rich coal that is now scarce in the world. It is that relatively tiny but densely populated sliver of land along the Russian border, less than 100km across in many places, that is the powder keg that some believe may set off World War III.





The Ukrainian military has been massing troops and armor along the line of separation while the Russian military has pulled up its forces to their side of the border. Shelling, sniper fire and other provocations from the Ukrainian side are intensifying, with the hope of provoking the Russians into moving forces onto Ukrainian territory, thus allowing the collective West to shout “Aha! Russian aggression!” Then they could put a stop to Nord Stream II pipeline, scoring a major geopolitical victory for Washington and follow that up with plenty of other belligerent moves designed to hurt Russia politically and economically.

For the Russians, there are no good choices that are obvious. Not responding to Ukrainian provocations and doing nothing while they shell and invade the cities of Donetsk and Lugansk, killing Russian citizens who live there, would make Russia look weak, undermine the Russian government’s position domestically and cost it a great deal of geopolitical capital internationally. Responding to Ukrainian

provocations with overwhelming military force and crushing the Ukrainian military as was done in Georgia in 2008 would be popular domestically but could potentially lead to a major escalation and possibly an all-out war with NATO. Even if militarily the conflict is contained and NATO forces sit it out, as they did in Georgia, the political ramifications would cause much damage to the Russian economy through tightened sanctions and disruptions to international trade.

Those being the obvious bad choices, what are the obvious good ones, if any? Here, we have to pay careful attention to the official pronouncements Putin has made over the years, and to take them as face value. First, he said that Russia does not need any more territory; it has all the land it could ever want. Second, he said that Russia will follow the path of maximum liberalization in granting citizenship to compatriots and that, in turn, the well-being of Russia's citizens is a top priority. Third, he said that resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine through military means is unacceptable. Given these constraints, what courses of action remain open?

The answer, I believe, is obvious: evacuation. There are around 3.2 million residents in Donetsk People's Republic and 1.4 million in Lugansk People's Republic, for a total of some 4.6 million residents. This may seem like a huge number, but it's moderate by the scale of World War II evacuations. Keep in mind that Russia has already absorbed over a million Ukrainian migrants and refugees without much of a problem. Also, Russia is currently experiencing a major labor shortage, and an infusion of able-bodied Russians would be most welcome.

Domestically, the evacuation would likely be quite popular: Russia is doing right by its own people by pulling them out of harm's way.

The patriotic base would be energized and the already very active Russian volunteer movement would swing into action to assist the Emergencies Ministry in helping move and resettle the evacuees. The elections that are to take place later this year would turn into a nationwide welcoming party for several million new voters. The Donbass evacuation could pave the way for other waves of repatriation that are likely to follow. There are some 20 million Russians scattered throughout the world, and as the world outside Russia plunges deeper and deeper into resource scarcity they too will want to come home. While they may presently be reluctant to do so, seeing the positive example of how the Donbass evacuees are treated could help change their minds.

The negative optics of surrendering territory can be countered by not surrendering any territory. As a guarantor of the Minsk Agreements, Russia must refuse to surrender the Donbass to the Ukrainian government until it fulfills the terms of these agreements, which it has shown no intention of doing for seven years now and which it has recently repudiated altogether. It is important to note that the Russian military can shoot straight across all of Donbass without setting foot on Ukrainian soil. Should the Ukrainian forces attempt to enter Donbass, they will be dealt with as shown in the following instructional video. Note that the maximum range of the Tornado-G system shown in the video is 120km.

And should the Ukrainians care to respond by attacking Russian territory, another one of Putin's pronouncements helps us understand what would happen next: if attacked, Russia will respond not just against the attackers but also against the centers of decision-making responsible for the attack. The Ukrainian command in Kiev, as well as its NATO advisers, would probably

keep this statement in mind when considering their steps.

The Donbass evacuation should resonate rather well internationally. It would be a typical Putin judo move knocking NATO and the US State Department off-balance. Since this would be a large humanitarian mission, it would be ridiculous to attempt to portray it as “Russian aggression.” On the other hand, Russia would be quite within its rights to issue stern warnings that any attempt to interfere with the evacuation or to launch provocations during the evacuation process would be dealt with very harshly, freeing Russia’s hands in dispatching to God the berserkers from the Ukraine’s Nazi battalions, some of whom don’t particularly like to follow orders.

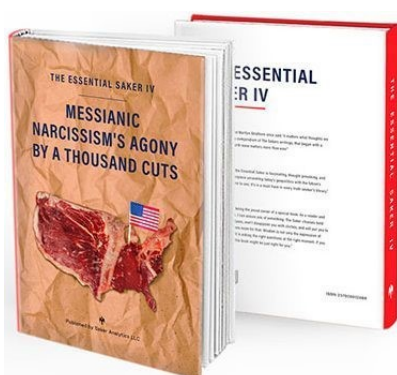
The West would be left with the following status quo. The Donbass is empty of residents but off-limits to them or to the Ukrainians. The evacuation would in no sense change the standing or the negotiating position of the evacuees and their representatives vis-à-vis the Minsk agreements, locking this situation in place until Kiev undertakes constitutional reform, becomes a federation and grants full autonomy to Donbass, or until the Ukrainian state ceases to exist and is partitioned. The Ukraine would be unable to join NATO (a pipe dream which it has stupidly voted into its constitution) since this would violate the NATO charter, given that it does not control its own territory.

Further sanctions against Russia would become even more difficult to justify, since it would be untenable to accuse it of aggression for undertaking a humanitarian mission to protect its own citizens or for carrying out its responsibilities as a guarantor of the Minsk agreements. The Donbass would remain as a stalker zone roamed by Russian battlefield robots sniping Ukrainian

marauders, with the odd busload of schoolchildren there on a field trip to lay flowers on the graves of their ancestors. Its ruined Soviet-era buildings, not made any newer by three decades of Ukrainian abuse and neglect, will bear silent witness to the perpetual ignominy of the failed Ukrainian state.

History is as often driven by accident as by logic, but since we cannot predict accidents, logic is the only tool we have in trying to guess the shape of the future. Rephrasing Voltaire, this, then, is the best that we can expect to happen in this the best of all possible worlds.

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