

Prisoner Swap Sign of Putin's Political Defeat in Ukraine

By: Fazil Amzaev*

Russian state-run news agency TASS on November 15 quoted Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying Putin spoke by phone with separatist leaders Aleksandr Zakharchenko of the Donetsk region and Igor Plotnitsky of Luhansk.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has told leaders of Moscow-backed separatists in Ukraine's eastern regions of Luhansk and Donetsk that he favors a plan for a prisoner swap with Kyiv, in a rare acknowledgement of direct contact with the separatist forces.

The conversations came after Putin earlier on November 15 promised Viktor Medvedchuk, leader of the pro-Russia Ukrainian organization Choice, that he would speak to the separatists about a prisoner exchange with the authorities in Kyiv. "Putin told them that he had supported Medvedchuk's proposal on large-scale exchanges of people held by both sides", Peskov said.

The spokesman said Zakharchenko and Plotnitsky supported a swap in principle. "However, they pointed out that the issue will have to be worked out further on with Ukraine's representatives", Peskov said.

Now the causes for such a significant progress in the prisoner exchange are much discussed. It is the confirmation that Putin spoke directly to the Russia-backed separatist leaders was unusual in that such direct contacts are rarely admitted. Russia has been officially denying any involvement in the ongoing conflict in the two regions, where the separatists have had control of some districts since the spring of 2014.

The differing reasons have been expressed by analysts. Someone says that the Kremlin needs new humanitarian peacekeeping initiatives in order to demonstrate to the world community the commitment to a peaceful settlement of the situation in Donbas. Others say that Putin wants to attach importance to the leaders of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics. Still others say that Putin is trying to raise his rating in the run-up to presidential elections in Russia.

Speaking about the prospects for the prisoner swap, due to the fact that Putin personally intervenes in this process and against the backdrop of the evidence that Zakharchenko and Plotnitsky (as well as his current successor) are not independent figures, this process will ultimately come to pass.

Here I would like to draw attention to another aspect of this event. As we know, the prisoner exchange process has been blocked for 14 months already. And, therefore, Russia's much desire to unblock this process points to a more global cause, more global changes that the Russian side has had in its position regarding the Ukrainian crisis.

Undoubtedly over the past 3.5 years the Russian government has become much more cooperative and compliant in its position on Ukraine.

We all recall how in 2014 Putin repeatedly spoke about the new state entity “Novorossia” (New Russia), which was supposed to unite the southeast regions of Ukraine. However, as early as May 2015, shortly after the signing of the Second Minsk Agreement, Russia’s representatives of the so-called “DNR” (the Donetsk People’s Republic) announced that the project was ended.

After that, Putin and his entourage began to declare that they recognize the territorial integrity of Ukraine (without the Crimea) and call on all the parties of the conflict to implement the Minsk agreements.

On 7 July 2017, Russia agreed to the establishment of a new post of the U.S. special representative on Ukraine and the appointment of Kurt Volker to this post. And this is in view of the fact that a year before, Russia did not support the idea of the U.S. joining the Norman format during the regular meeting of the Normandy Quartet Foreign Ministers, held on 23 June, 2016 in Paris.

Such easing is observed not only with respect to the conflict in eastern Ukraine, but also on the “Crimean front”. On 25 October, Russia extradited two convicted deputy chairmen of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis – Akhtem Chiygoz and Ilmi Umerov. Undoubtedly, the fact of extradition of two representatives of the Crimean Tatar after more than two years of prosecution points to Russia’s inability to withstand international pressure, which has significantly increased over the past two years.

And now Putin agrees to intensify prisoner exchange process between Ukraine and the separatists backed by Moscow.

All this indicates that Putin has fallen into the trap of his self-confidence and vanity. Over the past decade, he systematically squeezed out of his entourage any politicians, experts and journalists who could provide him with an adequate picture of what was happening inside and outside Russia. It was the reliance on the cringing analysts and experts that caused the adventurous intervention in Ukraine in February 2014. This is the purpose, in particular, of a failed attempt to tame the Muslim Crimean Tatars in the Crimea, when relying on the pleasant predictions of the Crimean “analysts”, including the several traitors from among the Crimean Tatars, the Russian repressive machine began to persecute Muslims in the face of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars and some Islamic organizations, accusing them of extremism and terrorism.

All of the above are a sign of the impending defeat of Russia in the Ukrainian crisis.

*** Head of the Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir in Ukraine**

*** Written for Ar-Rayah Newspaper – Issue 160**