

# The View from Russia | 10 April 2014

Aftermath of the revolution in Ukraine

*The View from Russia* is a fortnightly series in which Open Briefing's Russia researcher, **Erin Decker**, examines news coverage from four major Russian sources: RT is a television network and news website funded by the Russian government; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* is a privately owned newspaper that is generally regarded as pro-opposition; *Kommersant* is an independent daily newspaper; the *Moscow Times* is an English-language newspaper that provides a foreign perspective.

The situation in Ukraine remains uncertain following Russia's annexation of Crimea, as pro-Russian demonstrations have broken out in the country's eastern cities of Donetsk, Kharkov and Lugansk. Government buildings in these cities have been occupied by pro-Russian activists, with secessionists in Donetsk declaring a new 'people's republic' and calling for a referendum on secession on 11 May.

RT's coverage has been portraying Ukraine as extremely unstable and the current government as unable to even uphold basic law and order in the country. RT explained that Ukraine's State Security Service was compelled to hire US private military and security company Greystone Ltd 'to perform the functions of political investigation and state security', implying that the situation in the country is so destabilised that government security forces are unable to maintain control. Further emphasising how much of a threat an unstable Ukraine could pose, RT also reported that 'the sharp increase in the level of crime and instability following the revolution in Kiev' requires that the government increase security measures for the country's nuclear facilities due to the 'danger of radioactive material falling into the wrong hands.' It quoted an 'expert' – British journalist and blogger Graham Philips – who said that 'Kiev has been looking for a pretext' to restart and militarise its nuclear programme and that the presence of Russian military in the country could provide the excuse it has been looking for. None of the other media sources examined cited this as a legitimate danger.

Whereas RT's coverage portrayed Ukraine as extremely dangerous and unstable, apparently implying that intervention by Russia may be necessary, *Kommersant's* coverage of the situation in Ukraine was comparatively less sensational. *Kommersant* quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying that Russia 'has absolutely no intention to or interest in redrawing Ukraine's borders'. However, the newspaper went on to say that Moscow is nevertheless insisting that Ukraine should be federalised, with Lavrov explaining 'not because that is what we want, but because this is what the southern and eastern regions [of Ukraine] are demanding'.



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The *Moscow Times* reported that Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev recently made a visit to Crimea 'in an apparent bid to fortify Russia's control of the region', while Ukrainian authorities condemned it as provocation. While the *Moscow Times*, like *Kommersant*, reported that Russia has denied that it intends to interfere militarily in mainland Ukraine, it also emphasised that Russia 'has not stopped short of trying to influence the country in other ways. On Sunday, Lavrov reiterated Russia's proposal that Ukraine become a federation, saying that Ukraine cannot be a unitary state and should be a loose federation of regions able to opt for different economic, linguistic and religious models.' According to the *Moscow Times*, the Kremlin believes Ukraine should be a federation because its east and west speak Russian and Ukrainian respectively; however, 'Ukraine's Foreign Ministry, for its part, lashed out at the Kremlin over its federalisation proposals, asking why federalism is not being introduced in Russia and why Ukrainian – which is spoken by millions of people in Russia – has not become a state language there.' The newspaper went even further to point out that 'Russia, which is formally a federation, has been accused by critics of not practicing what it preaches and being effectively a highly centralised unitary state.' The *Moscow Times* carried more coverage of Ukraine's reaction to Russia's calls for its federalisation and reported that the Ukrainian foreign ministry has rejected the federalisation proposals and is adamant that Russia wants only one thing: the complete 'disintegration and destruction of the Ukrainian state'.

A report from *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* took a different angle than the other news sources, exposing Russia's fears of the possibility of Ukraine aligning with NATO. It reported that Russia's foreign ministry warned Ukraine against changing its status as a non-aligned state, as 'economic relations between the two countries depended upon it'. In a further effort to discourage this, Russia reminded Ukraine that the last time Ukraine seriously discussed integration with NATO it led to a temporary freeze in Russian-Ukrainian political relations and 'deepened the schism in Ukrainian society'. Moscow's abrupt and strong reaction, as portrayed by *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, seemed to expose the government's genuine fear that NATO could become involved in the Ukraine crisis.

### **Comment**

Pro-Kremlin Russian media has been portraying the current situation in Ukraine as increasingly dangerous and unstable, with the interim government unable to maintain even basic law and order without the help of private security contractors. At the same time, the generous coverage given to the pro-Russian demonstrations in Ukraine's eastern cities helps to support Moscow's argument that Ukraine should federalise due to the deep linguistic, historical, economic and political schisms within the country. The current situation in Ukraine, with protesters occupying government buildings in several cities and calling for referendums on secession, is seen as supporting Russia's case that outside intervention is needed and that the country's division is inevitable. However, Western sources have questioned whether Moscow has not been helping to create or at least amplify some of this pro-Russian sentiment by bussing in activists to join the protests, in which case the demonstrations may not be as organic as they seem.

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