



Could Forthcoming Donbass Referenda be Russia's "Defense-Oriented" Response to Kharkov?

Description

DONBAS/UKRAINE/RUSSIA: There are arguments for and against each of the primary participants in the conflict agreeing to the scenario of Donbass referenda ending the military phase of the conflict before the coming winter.

The two Donbass Republics' Civic Chambers announced on Monday that they'd like to hold referenda on joining Russia as soon as possible. **Margarita Simonyan**, who exerts massive influence over the formation of public opinion in her country as well as among Russian-friendly folks abroad through her well-known media roles, reacted to this scenario by predicting the following on Telegram:

"Today it's referendum, tomorrow – it's recognition of LPR as a part of Russia. The day after that, the strikes on the Russian territory become an all-out war of Ukraine and NATO with Russia, which will untie Moscow's hands in so many aspects."

The larger context within which those announcements were made is Russia's unexpected setback in Kharkov Region, which was followed by Kiev building upon that momentum to seize control of a village in Lugansk and thus symbolically reverse that Republic's full liberation that was achieved over the summer. Turkish President Erdogan also just told CBS that President Putin allegedly informed him during their meeting on the sidelines of last week's SCO Summit in Samarkand "that he's willing to end this as soon as possible. The way things are going right now are quite problematic. I think a significant step will be taken forward."

It's therefore possible that the scenario of those two Donbass Republics' democratically driven accession to the Russian Federation, which could even perhaps coincide with the Kherson and/or Zaporozhye Regions', could be the asymmetrical response that observers are bracing themselves to expect from President Putin after his side's unexpected setback in Kharkov Region. To explain, Moscow would then regard attacks against them as attacks against itself exactly as Simonyan predicted, which would thus establish very clear red lines that might promptly end the military phase of the Ukrainian Conflict. NATO-backed Kiev would either voluntarily cease hostilities or be forced by

Moscow into finally doing so.

This sequence of events isn't guaranteed to unfold, but it nevertheless can't be discounted either, especially after Simonyan shared her thoughts about what might happen. It could therefore very well be the case that she and the Donbass Republics' Civic Chambers are testing domestic and foreign reactions to that scenario prior to the Kremlin making a decision about this in the near future. After all, the latest dynamics of the Ukrainian Conflict appear to have reached the point where time works for and against each side's favor.

Kiev's tactical momentum continues to grow with time, but the conflict's perpetuation works against the strategic interests of its European NATO patrons by spiking the risks of profound socio-political consequences connected to the unprecedented economic crisis catalyzed by the anti-Russian sanctions. Likewise, the perspective is the inverse for Moscow: the conflict's perpetuation advances its strategic interests related to EU unity over Ukraine and Western unity more broadly but at the expense of its tactical interests since it's struggling to stop Kiev's on-the-ground NATO-backed momentum.

Accordingly, a swift end to the military phase of the conflict would avert the worst-case strategic scenarios from Kiev and its Western patrons' perspective but at the expense of their political-territorial interests of recapturing control of Donbass, Kherson, and Zaporozhye. Viewed from Moscow, this could avert the worst-case tactical scenario of losing control over those liberated regions and the major soft power consequences connected with that but at the expense of its earlier described strategic interests. Thus, there are arguments for and against each of the primary participants in the conflict agreeing to the scenario of Donbass referenda ending the military phase of the conflict before the coming winter.

The very fact that this is even being credibly suggested as based upon a reasonable interpretation of Simonyan's reaction to the Donbass Civic Chambers' announcements hints that President Putin is seriously flirting with a defensive-oriented response to his side's recent setback in Kharkov Region instead of exclusively prioritizing an offensive-oriented one like many observers expected. Once again, that's not to say that he'll definitely opt for the scenario that was described in the present analysis, but that it can't confidently be ruled out after what President Erdogan just said about his Russian counterpart's alleged desire "to end this as soon as possible."

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1. Army-Wars-Conflict Zones-Military Tech.
2. Main
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