

Welcome, Escalation Why Minsk 2 is Not Going to Work

by Stefan Meister

The latest cease-fire in eastern Ukraine was a triumph for President Putin. He was able to push through a slew of major points without making any concessions of his own. Stefan Meister argues that Ukrainian leadership should give up control of the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in order to protect the rest of the country from further destabilization from Russia. The EU urgently needs to make a clear decision on whether to integrate what is left of Ukraine – with all the consequences this entails.

With the February 12, 2015 cease-fire agreement in Minsk over the war in eastern Ukraine, Russian leaders came a good deal closer to their goal of sucking Ukraine back into their sphere of influence. No cease-fire is going to work, however, until Russia has completely secured its sway over its neighbor. The European Union has very little with which to counter this, for it has shied away from a military conflict (on reasonable grounds) and has no other means of influencing Russian politics. Ukrainian leadership should give up control of the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in order to protect the rest of the country from further destabilizations from Russia. At the same time the EU needs to make a clear decision on the issue of integrating the rest of Ukraine – with all the consequences this entails

Triumph at Minsk

The second Minsk agreement (Minsk 2) involved unprecedented levels of diplomatic effort on the part of Germany, France, and the EU to achieve a cease-fire in eastern Ukraine. Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande threw all their political weight into getting Russian leaders and eastern Ukrainian separatists to stop fighting and preventing the conflict from getting even

worse. It became clear in the process that the EU has in fact only minimal power to influence Russia or change the situation in eastern Ukraine. Equally clear was the extent to which the region's stabilization depends on Moscow's pleasure. Russia has many more instruments at its disposal for undermining Ukraine and shaping its development, and it is making ample use of them. For their part, the EU member states have yet to agree on whether they even really want greater integration with Ukraine, for this requires investment in its stabilization.

It was a triumph for President Putin that the European Union's most powerful politician, Angela Merkel, came all the way to Moscow to negotiate a cease-fire with him. The Russian president was able to push through a whole series of major points without making any compromises of his own. On the open issues, Putin managed to prevent clear agreements from being reached. The presence of separatist leaders at Minsk made them a de facto part of the negotiating process, thereby granting them indirect recognition. Elections to determine leadership in separatist areas have been

stipulated. Kiev has been made responsible for paying pensions and social benefits in both separatist regions, for assuring monetary transactions there, and for maintaining the regions' comprehensive rights within the framework of a decentralized Ukrainian state.

Conversely, various other matters remain unclear: where exactly will the lines of the future border be drawn? How will the Ukrainian-Russian border be protected? How will OSCE monitor the cease-fire and what means will it have at its disposal? Under what circumstances are elections in East Ukraine to be conducted?

Are we on the road to Minsk 3?

The Russian government has thus come much closer to meeting its goals for Ukraine's future, although it has not yet arrived exactly where it wants to be. From a Russian point of view, Minsk 2 is just an interim solution on the road to comprehensive control – on Russia's terms. The war in eastern Ukraine is diminishing the Ukrainian government's ability for internal reform, worsening the country's economic and social conditions. This in turn sets back Ukraine's integration with the EU and postpones the harmonization of standards – increasing the Ukrainian population's potential for frustration.

Until now, however, there has been no clear rejection of the idea of integrating Ukraine into the EU – or NATO. Nor has there been clarity on the matter of recognizing separatists as legitimate negotiating partners or on the country's decentralization at Russia's behest.

Putin's letter to Ukraine's President Poroshenko – the so-called Putin Plan – of mid-January 2015 clearly states the Russian conditions for establishing peace in eastern Ukraine: complete recognition of a new demarcation line, a unilateral cease-fire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons on the Ukrainian side, a decentralization of the Ukrainian state with considerable autonomy for the separatist areas – and beyond this, opportunities for Russia to influence Kiev's future policies. Without total agreement on these points – no cease-fire.

The Russian president will ultimately get what he wants in the course of additional negotiations – Minsk 3 or Minsk 4. The EU has very few ways of opposing him, since it has no desire to increase military or economic pressure, and remains as yet unprepared to reach an agreement on Ukraine's comprehensive stabilization.

Meanwhile, Moscow has realized that the subject of US arms deliveries to Ukraine has enormous potential for splitting the transatlantic relationship, which is of

course very attractive from the Russian point of view. This is where we will most likely see the next Russian move on the chessboard. Encouraging alienation between Washington and Berlin over an unresolved conflict, short of open dispute, would nicely complement Moscow's ongoing work to divide the EU – via offers of credit to the Greek government and shipments of inexpensive Russian gas to Hungary. With arms deliveries from the US, Putin would get what he has wanted all along: official interference from the US and the opportunity, through further escalation, to negotiate Ukraine's future directly with President Obama.

What is to be done?

Ukraine and the EU are going to have to accept the loss of the two separatist regions, just as they must accept the loss of Crimea. This is what is needed to save the rest of Ukraine and prevent the state's further destabilization. Kiev is entirely dependent on the EU's negotiating skills and its ability to pressure Russia – and on the West's readiness to pay a price. Neither tougher sanctions against Russia nor deliveries of American arms can stop the Russian leadership. Putin will always see to it that the separatists have equivalent or superior military power and that the costs of the economic sanctions can be borne.

The EU's indecisiveness on integrating Ukraine and setting up a proper Marshall-style plan for its recovery gives Moscow the chance to weaken the government in Kiev further and perhaps even to bring it back into its own sphere of influence. The fact that Europe's politicians are wary of facing the consequences of these realities makes the Russian bargaining position even stronger. Only a clear decision on whether or not to integrate Ukraine – with all that this involves in terms of financial and political commitment – could improve the EU's ability to negotiate.

If the EU fails to make this decision, Moscow's next move will to a large extent dictate the next steps and compromises. In doing so, the EU will ultimately see a weak or disintegrating state emerge in its immediate neighborhood, with the high social, economic, and security costs that this entails.

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