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COMMENT

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The crisis over Ukraine – three years on: Is a “grand bargain” totally ruled out?

An explicit “deal” between the West and Russia on Ukraine is not possible. Europe would like to reach a more pragmatic *modus vivendi* with Moscow, but a sustainable freezing of the conflict in Donbas remains a critical minimum precondition.

The military phase of the conflict in Ukraine’s Donbas started three years ago, in May 2014. Throughout this period, observers have discussed whether or not the West would eventually go for an agreement with the Kremlin, “turn the page” and “trade” Ukraine for cooperation with Russia in other areas. A quick return to “business as usual” after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and a half-hearted initial Western reaction to Russia’s annexation of Crimea provided sufficient grounds for concern that this would happen.

Thus far, however, the West has remained formally committed to the cause of conflict resolution and the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Diplomatic rhetoric gradually became less ambiguous in putting the blame for the continuing conflict on Moscow. Furthermore, in March 2015 the European Council legally conditioned the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia upon the full implementation of the peace plan known as Minsk-2, which foresees the return of Ukraine’s sovereign control over its common border with Russia.

Several considerations may help to explain why the “understanding”, viewed as plausible at the beginning of the conflict, has not come about. First and foremost, the majority of Western political circles came to the conclusion that what is at stake is not a controversy with

Russia over Ukraine, but a much more comprehensive antagonism, in which Ukraine is only one of the components. Recurring talk of a second Cold War, new military deployments on both sides, Western concerns about Russia’s interference in internal political processes, and about other means of so-called “hybrid” warfare, constituted a problem that extended far beyond Ukraine, and which was impossible to solve in Ukraine only.

Second, there is currently a much better understanding that the era of Yalta-type partitions of Europe is long gone and that Ukraine is no one’s to “give away”, whatever classical *realpolitiker* may say. Unlike in 1945, the would-be “big powers” do not have the resources to impose their will on a third country. In today’s reality, the Western pressure on Ukraine to make it comply with a hypothetical Western-Russian agreement that Kyiv would not find acceptable (the federalization of the country, for example) is more likely to lead to deep political or even military destabilization at the EU’s borders than to the “orderly” establishment of a “privileged sphere of interest”.

Third, selective engagement between the West and Russia simply did not work. The “Ukraine for Syria” trade-off failed by default when Russia and the West also found themselves on different sides of

the divide in Syria. Yet all this does not mean that the West has given up attempts to preserve pragmatic interaction with Russia, on Ukraine as well as more generally. Two fundamentals are of primary significance in this context.

One is the notorious “Ukraine fatigue”. When Dutch citizens reject the ratification of the Association Agreement with Ukraine in a referendum, when it takes the EU an unprecedentedly long time to complete visa liberalization with Ukraine *after* all the conditions have been met, and when US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reportedly asks his G-7 colleagues why American taxpayers should care about the conflict in Ukraine – all this reveals a lack of confidence that Ukraine is worth the effort.

But more important is the fact that Europe is obviously uncomfortable witnessing Russia’s conversion from a potential strategic partner into a strategic problem. Several EU capitals openly disagree with the adopted tough line. Deconfliction, albeit not at any price, remains an acute political task for the EU. Dialogue is actively being pursued, as recent visits to Russia by EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini and German Chancellor Angela Merkel may attest.

The West is refraining from raising the costs of the conflict in Ukraine

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for Russia, out of apparent concerns about exacerbating the situation, and apparently cannot do much to wrest the initiative on the ground from Moscow's hands. More dubious are persistent attempts to push through the Nord Stream 2 project. This gas pipeline on the Baltic Sea bed would deprive Ukraine of most of its transit revenues (which would then have to be indirectly compensated for by Western donors) and dismantle Ukraine's largest remaining leverage over Russia, which has been the Kremlin's objective all along. Yet none other than Berlin, otherwise the champion of Ukraine's cause, stubbornly continues to treat Nord Stream 2 as a "commercial project".

What is missing from the sought-after *modus vivendi* is progress in the conflict zone. On the contrary, the conflict tends to escalate from time to time, as the tragic death of an OSCE monitoring mission member demonstrated at the end of April. Furthermore, this spring the situation acquired qualitatively new negative dynamics after the legal trade between breakaway territories and the rest of Ukraine was disrupted.

Arguably, from the Western point of view, a frozen conflict or even a sustainable ceasefire would be a

significant improvement compared with the current situation. Whether it is negotiable, whether the West would be willing to go beyond the circulating semi-official suggestions about disaggregating Minsk-2 and gradually lifting the sanctions, and whether Moscow would be satisfied with merely another frozen conflict as the end-result of its Ukraine policy, as opposed to decisive influence in the country, remains to be seen.

Perhaps this is not yet likely. But it is still a necessary minimum precondition for any real improvement in Western-Russian relations.