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Guest post: what will the west do when Minsk-2 unravels?

Guest writer Feb 13 11:22 Comment



By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

European leaders desperate to avoid going down an Iranian-style route of economic and financial sanctions and to dissuade the US from sending weapons signed a second agreement to end the fighting in Ukraine on Thursday in the Belarus capital, Minsk. But it will be as unworkable as the first Minsk agreement signed in September 2014. The new agreement has weaknesses similar to those of its predecessor and will unravel in the next few months.

How will the weak Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) go about removing foreign troops and mercenaries? Will Russia really permit Ukraine to take control of its border next year, after local elections in March and the adoption of a new Ukrainian constitution that outlines some form regional devolution to the Donbas?

Indeed, could elections ever be considered free and fair if they are held under the barrel of a gun? With crime rampant in the separatist-controlled Donbas, will it be safe to transfer funds for social payments and pensions from Kiev to the region and for taxes to be transferred back to the central government?

The reaction from leaders in the region was sceptical or cautious at best. Dalia Grybauskaitė, Lithuania's president, said Minsk-2 was a "weak" document; Bronisław Komorowski, Poland's president, said peace was still a faraway goal.

The main reason Minsk-2 will not hold is that the person who began the conflict – Russian President Vladimir Putin – has not achieved his strategic goal of destroying Ukraine as an independent state. Western sanctions have not served as a deterrent.

As Andrey Illarionov, a former economic adviser to Putin, reminded us this week:

the goal of Putin's war against Ukraine is an attempt at the inclusion of it, Belarus, and also Russian-speaking enclaves in other countries in some kind of geopolitical union called 'the Russian world,' with the liquidation or at least the limitation of their sovereignty.

The Donbas conflict will only end, he argues, if Putin gives up "the policy of denying the statehood, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine and other states with Russian or Russian speaking population".

Putin has always confused Russian speakers in Ukraine with Russians, and has talked of "17m Russians" living in Ukraine. That this is a misnomer can be seen from the weak support for separatism in the six Russian-speaking regions of eastern and southern Ukraine outside the Donbas.

US and EU leaders are unwilling to face the implications of a return to the Europe of the 1930s, with one country seeking to destroy another. They are desperate to put off the inevitable confrontation with Russia through negotiation. A year ago, when former US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton made an analogy between Nazi Germany and Putin's Russia defending their co-ethnics in other countries, she was ridiculed. But today, her critics agree with her.

Putin's demand for Ukraine to become a federal state is a non-starter. It has no support among the Ukrainian public or its elites and is an attempt at 'Bosnianising' the country. No federal country in the world gives its provinces a veto over foreign and defence policy, as Putin is insisting the Donbas must be given in Ukraine.

Putin's objective to install a pro-Russian leader, parliament and government presupposes the annulling of presidential and parliamentary elections held in May and October of last year that were recognised as free and fair by the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the EU. No sovereign country in the world would accept such a demand from its neighbour.

Putin's paranoia about Nato and EU enlargement into what he views as Russia's 'zone of privileged interests' is a misnomer. Although an April 2008 Nato summit in Bucharest named Ukraine and Georgia as future members, France and Germany have said they would veto this. The EU has never offered membership to Ukraine.

And who will persuade the Ukrainian parliament to overturn a December vote by a constitutional majority of 302 to move away from the non-bloc status that Putin wants Ukraine to return to?

When Minsk-2 unravels, what will US and EU leaders do next?

Ukraine will not agree to a Minsk-3. If Russia and the separatists again fail to implement the agreement, the only options open will be to remove Russia from the Swift international payments system, blacklist its president, prime minister and its foreign and defence ministers, and supply Ukraine with defensive military equipment, training and satellite intelligence.

You can't make the same mistake twice. The second time you make it, it's no longer a mistake. It's a choice.

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