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Europe should remain steadfast on Ukraine: The collapse of the Western consensus would condone aggression and further erode the European security order

The war in Donbas continues, with no quick settlement in sight. Amidst speculation about a ‘grand bargain’ between the US and Russia at the expense of Ukraine, it is in Europe’s self-interest to stick to a policy that condemns the Russian aggression and supports Ukraine’s sovereignty.

It will soon be three years since Russia annexed Crimea and launched a hybrid war in eastern Ukraine. 10,000 people have been killed, and 1.7 million are now registered in other parts of the country as internally displaced persons.

The second Minsk agreement, concluded in February 2015 between the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France, has probably helped to reduce the fighting and stabilize the contact line that separates the ‘fantasy republics’ of Donetsk and Luhansk, orchestrated and supplied by Russia, from the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government. The Russian-controlled area in the east covers less than five per cent of Ukraine’s territory.

However, the Minsk agreements have failed to lead to a settlement. The Russian interpretation of the agreements has aimed at legitimization of the two puppet regimes as autonomous parts of Ukraine. This could allow Russia to control Ukraine’s key foreign policy decisions. There are good grounds for assuming that the Kremlin is not interested in a settlement that would truly respect Ukraine’s sovereignty and right to self-determination.

In recent years, Ukraine has learned to better defend itself not only against Russia, but also

against Western pressure to accept concessions that would endanger its sovereignty and governability. Last year it succeeded in convincing its Western partners that local elections in the rebel areas, foreseen by the Minsk agreement, have to be conditional upon the establishment of a satisfactory security situation.

So far, the OSCE monitoring mission that operates in the conflict area has only very limited access to the rebel statelets. Independent journalists and NGOs have largely been ejected. Regular reports by the UN Human Rights Office paint a bleak picture of unsafety and the despair of the remaining local population. Talks about turning the OSCE mission into an armed police mission have been met with protests in the rebel areas.

The inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States has injected some new dynamics, and above all greater uncertainty, into the ongoing conflict. What is known is that Trump has talked about dropping sanctions and seeking to mend relations with Russia. This has fuelled concerns that a grand bargain between the big powers might involve the US acknowledging that Ukraine (and possibly some other countries neighbouring Russia) belongs to Moscow’s sphere of interest.

The changed mood was echoed in an op-ed by a major Ukrainian oligarch, Victor Pinchuk, published in the *Wall Street Journal* in late December 2016. The piece called on Ukraine to ‘temporarily’ drop the goal of joining the EU and NATO, and to accept local elections in Donbas. Such concessions, he argued, would be necessary for the sake of peace.

If the purpose of the article was to test Ukraine’s readiness for appeasement, it failed. Many Ukrainians share the perception that Pinchuk is motivated by self-interest, and not by a vision of what is best for the country. Ukrainians are well aware that accession to the EU and NATO is not feasible for quite some time to come. Yet they are not ready to relinquish their right to define their own priorities. Between December 2013 and December 2015, support for joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union dropped from 31 to 15 per cent.

Ukrainians are also aware that neutrality or non-alignment would not guarantee Ukraine’s security. Ukraine’s neighbouring country of Moldova has inscribed neutrality into its constitution, but this has not helped to resolve the conflict of Transnistria and has not protected the country against Russia’s meddling.

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All in all, an attempt to impose a solution on Ukraine that has been agreed among the major powers would not produce sustainable peace. The Ukrainians are prepared for a prolonged conflict. As long as Russia is not ready to engage in open and considerably more intense (and expensive) warfare, the Ukrainian position can be expected to hold.

At the same time, there is much uncertainty not only about the US, but also about the EU policy towards Ukraine and Russia. Pressure to lift sanctions against Russia has grown in several EU member states, most notably France and Italy. The two leading contenders in the French presidential elections, to be held in April and May, are both in favour of dropping the sanctions.

Ukraine is also slipping down the EU's list of priorities, even for Germany, a key architect of the European approach combining diplomacy, sanctions and support for domestic reforms. Ukraine's limited progress on the reform of the judiciary, the fight against corruption and administrative reform undermines Western support and diminishes Ukraine's capability to absorb assistance.

While there are more questions than answers about US foreign policy under the new administration, Europe

should actively work for consistency and consensus. For Europe, the conflict over Ukraine was always more about defending principles than defending Ukraine. If Ukraine's territorial integrity is not restored, ending sanctions or making other concessions to the aggressor would serve to condone the use of force and seal the collapse of the European security architecture.