

Ukraine–Russia: Is There a Way Out?

PERSPECTIVES on Peace & Security

INTRODUCTION

SORT BY

Steven Pifer, Brookings Institution, August 2014

| EU | NATO | U.S. FOREIGN POLICY | UKRAINE |

By all appearances, Kremlin policy has sought to destabilize Ukraine in order to hinder Kiev’s efforts to draw closer to the European Union and restore a degree of normalcy in the country. A combination of geopolitical and domestic political interests motivates this. Kiev has put forward ideas that might offer a basis for a political settlement. Will Russia pick up on those ideas?

What began last November as an internal political dispute within Ukraine over the country’s relationship with the European Union has become a major crisis between Ukraine and Russia, and between the West and Russia. The speed with which events played out in Kiev in February caught both Russia and the West off guard. The Russian approach has appeared reactive and ad hoc. It suggests that President Putin’s objective, underlying the seizure of Crimea and support for the separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk, is to hinder Kiev’s efforts to deepen its relationship with the European Union and restore a degree of normalcy, including in eastern Ukraine.

[Putin] expects neighbors to defer to Russian interests on issues that

Moscow deems vital. That would include drawing too close to NATO and, seemingly, the European Union as well.

A combination of geopolitical and domestic political interests motivates Mr. Putin’s approach. His vision of Russia as a great power includes a sphere of influence. He does not seek to recreate the Soviet Union. He does, however, seek to exercise influence over Russia’s neighbors, including through institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union, and he expects neighbors to defer to Russian interests on issues that Moscow deems vital. That would include drawing too close to NATO and, seemingly, the European Union as well.

A second factor is domestic politics. Given the historical and cultural links between Russia and Ukraine, and inflamed nationalist opinion in Russia, pulling Crimea and Ukraine “back” toward Russia plays well with Mr. Putin’s home constituency. His current approval rating stands at more than 85 percent. The flip side is that he does not want to be seen as having “lost” Ukraine (even though Russian actions are creating a generation of vehemently anti-Russian Ukrainians).

Mr. Putin appears to worry that a successful Maidan experiment would pose an unwelcome model for Russians. Moreover, when he talks about what happened on the Maidan or during the Orange Revolution, he appears to regard neither as a manifestation of popular discontent but as the result of “special operations” mounted by Western security services, aimed in part at Russia.

The sum of these interests means that Mr. Putin cares very much about what happens in Ukraine.

Given the recent success of the Ukrainian military, the Russian president’s options have narrowed. Despite the shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines flight, Russia continues to support the separatists. Reports continue of heavy equipment crossing the Russia-Ukraine border and of Russian artillery units

firing across the border at Ukrainian forces. Moscow's military assistance seems to have increased as the separatists have lost ground.

Reports that Russia has again massed troops on the border raise the question of whether Moscow might launch an overt military incursion. That should not be ruled out, and Mr. Putin may come under domestic pressure to intervene if the separatists are on the verge of defeat, but the Kremlin cannot be eager to intervene. The Russian army would likely prevail over Ukrainian forces, but it would almost certainly have to contend with a prolonged guerrilla conflict. The West would apply more severe economic sanctions.

The other option before Mr. Putin is to facilitate a ceasefire and settlement. While Moscow does not control all the separatists, it certainly controls a substantial number. It could change the game dramatically by ending the flow of heavy weapons, supplies and fighters.

Over the past two months, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has mooted points that should be of interest to the population of eastern Ukraine and, arguably, to Moscow. He has called for decentralizing power and pushing authority from Kiev to the regions, offered official status for the Russian language, and proposed early Rada (parliamentary) elections.

Mr. Poroshenko has made clear that a deeper relationship with NATO now is not on the table. That is a sensible policy. There is no appetite within the Alliance for something like a membership action plan, and pursuing NATO would only complicate Kiev's effort to bridge differences with eastern Ukraine. It should be possible to find a formulation that makes clear that NATO is not an issue for the foreseeable future. One suggestion has been that the Rada pass a law requiring that any request to join NATO would need approval in a referendum. The threshold would be well in excess of 50 percent and set to ensure that a move toward NATO would be possible only with support of a significant part of the eastern Ukrainian electorate.

Russia has a legitimate concern in how the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement might affect Ukrainian-Russian trade and other questions. The European Union and Ukraine have offered to hold consultations to discuss that.

Western leaders cannot negotiate over the Ukrainians' head, but they can counsel Mr. Putin to change course. The most likely interlocutor for the Russian president is German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Crimea would remain a difficult issue. In focusing on ending the crisis in eastern Ukraine, Moscow and Kiev could agree to disagree on Crimea and put that question off to a later date.

These ideas do not go as far as Moscow might like—Kiev will not accept a federalization scheme—but clever diplomats could work with them to see what kind of settlement might be fashioned. The ideas could produce a package that would allow Mr. Putin to argue that his key demands had been met.

Unfortunately, however, there has been no sign to date of Kremlin interest in picking up on these ideas. Whether that will change in the future remains to be seen.

The West will continue to support Kiev and implement agreed sanctions. It may impose additional sanctions if Russia escalates its support for the separatists and would definitely do so in the event of an overt Russian invasion. At the same time, the United States and European Union should press to keep open the possibility of a political settlement. That means cautioning Kiev not to overplay its hand; while Ukrainian forces are doing well on the battlefield, the Ukrainian government must match his military campaign with a political strategy designed to reach a settlement. At the end of the day, Kiev needs to get Moscow on board, as Russia retains the power to deny Ukraine normalcy.

The West also must keep channels open to Moscow. Western leaders cannot negotiate over the Ukrainians' head, but they can counsel Mr. Putin to change course. The most likely interlocutor for the Russian president is German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She has a working relationship with him and, given Berlin's position on the latest round of EU sanctions, enhanced credibility in Kiev.

The big question, however, remains: could a settlement along the lines sketched above draw Mr. Putin's interest and persuade him to change course and seek a political solution?

Printable PDF



Add a comment...

Comment using...

Facebook social plugin

[Terms & Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Credits](#)

| [Photo Credits](#)

© Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2014



The views expressed on this site are the sole opinions of the

The views expressed on this site are the sole opinions of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.