

Our Best Hope So Far

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The agreement brokered by heads of state of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France, meeting this week in Minsk, represents a signal achievement for European diplomacy. It not only specifies a firm deadline for the implementation of a comprehensive cease-fire and the immediate provision of humanitarian assistance to the population of the war-torn Donbas region but also restores the core principles of the original September cease-fire, which offer at least a glimmer of hope for a more sustainable peace. The first critical step is to stop the bloodshed and remove from the conflict zone heavy weapons which have already imposed massive “collateral damage” on the civilian population and on vital infrastructure that will be needed to restore normal economic life to the region.

Those who suggest that this agreement is a mere artifice, intended solely to buy time while the separatists consolidate Donetsk and Luhansk into a Ukrainian version of Moldova’s Transnistria – a frozen conflict that will hobble the parent country for decades to come – might be right, but they have missed the forest for the trees. Without question, the cease-fire could once again break down given deep mistrust and still unfulfilled military and political objectives of both warring sides. This is all the more dangerous because it is not clear that Kiev, Moscow or the putative authorities in Donetsk and Luhansk have full operational

control over all of the armed groups now operating in the region. Yet the outbreak of renewed sporadic violence is not the biggest or most important looming challenge.

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Think instead about the challenge and opportunity that an end to the bloodshed offers for Ukraine. With support from the international participants in the Minsk process, the parties must now proceed firmly in the direction set out in the latest agreement, to negotiate a mutually acceptable “special status” for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, enshrine that status in a broader constitutional reform with enhanced decentralization, and ensure that in the process, Ukraine maintains full control over its own territory, especially the border with Russia nearest the conflict zone.

What this means in practice is quite enormous: The Minsk agreement must be the starting point for a long-delayed process of internal Ukrainian reconciliation and the establishment of fully functional governing institutions that can operate honestly and transparently in the interest of the entire population. Since no previous Ukrainian government has seriously taken up these challenges, even in peacetime, it is not unreasonable to be concerned about the prospects of success going forward. Yet no previous Ukrainian government has appreciated the need for reconciliation and reform in terms of national survival, or enjoyed such a high degree of international attention and support, as does the current one.

With the latest promise of some \$40 billion in financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund and other sources, strictly conditioned on continuing anti-corruption reforms, Ukraine may actually have a chance to build something positive on the promising foundations of a highly mobilized civil society and reform-minded young people who are increasingly engaged in politics on the national and local levels. The single most important requirement

for Ukraine's success now remains to stop the bloodshed and destruction in the southeast, and the Minsk agreement offers the best hope so far of achieving that. If this agreement has any longer-term promise, it must be that Ukrainians take the opportunity of a halt to the fighting to redouble reform efforts, and that the rest of the country does not give up on the citizens of the southeast who have already suffered so much.

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