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Opinion – Is Standing by the Minsk II Agreement Worth It?

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KATHERINE BROWN, APR 28 2020

Standing by the Minsk II Agreement, signed five years ago, seems a little embarrassing. Not a single provision of the Minsk II has been implemented in full. Still, the E.U. mediators, France and Germany, have said Minsk II is here to stay. With so many issues escalating and then freezing since signing – including a small-scale naval standoff that forced the United States and the United Kingdom to respond by sending warships to the Black Sea – one has to wonder what standing next to the Minsk II is worth. This question is most timely for both Russia and Ukraine – because their stability is on the line. If the international community can pull together, drop the Minsk II, and reseat Ukraine and Russia at the negotiation table now, they can prevent losing a key moment of advantage over Russia and prevent the destabilization and possible civil war in Ukraine.

It is critical to ask the question *now* rather than *later* because Russia is in a position that is certainly unenviable. Gas prices are tanking worldwide and not a single nation outside of OPEC and Russia are minutely interested in talking about gas. The largest and deadliest pandemic in decades has nations turning away from the Ukrainian Crisis precisely at the moment Putin is perhaps most willing to rehash old issues. Russia needs sanctions to be lifted. Putin, ever the autocrat, needs his economy to stay afloat or he will lose the support of his people. Russia may be interested in coming back to the table if it means getting sanctions lifted.

On the other side of the table is Ukraine – it would appear from the outside that they've grown complacent regarding the annexation and loss of territory and ongoing (albeit somewhat frozen) conflict. The Euromaidan ideals are fading, even with a new President. Corruption remains its own plague on the people. It would be a mistake to assume Ukrainians on either side of the issue are accepting of their 'new norm'. Although less obvious, time is of the essence for Ukraine too. With stagnation and little change comes an environment ripe for riot. How many Presidents will the Ukrainians vote in and then kick out for failing to change things, before the entire country erupts in strife?

The goal of Minsk II was clear – end the conflict and get Russia out of Ukraine. You would think five years of that *not* happening would have indicated that unless something fantastical and extraordinary occurs…the goals of Minsk II are *still not going to happen*. What we have today is basically a stalemate – the Russian's new frozen conflict. While policy analysts and economists have said that the international sanctions would topple Putin or force him to leave – neither has occurred. For what it is worth, Putin has done a decent job up to today at absorbing those sanctions (that – or the Russian people have become complacent with a lack luster economy). The goals of sanctions has not worked – and a toppling gas market shouldn't give credit to the sanctions where credit is not due.

For Russia, the great thing about freezing conflicts is that the international community has a short attention span – they flipped interest away from the Ukrainian conflict very quickly. Russia does something – the international community then gets interested again…but then something else happens and the focus shifts away. The end result each time has been a Russian gain. At this point, it really does not make sense to continuing doing things the same way because we're not getting a favorable reaction.

Ukraine and Russia know the Minsk II is a failure – that's why neither side can do what it said it would do. It is up to the international community to accept that it has failed and encourage a new negotiation. Both parties are in positions

where renegotiating is mutually beneficial. Renegotiation now can prevent current issues from becoming catastrophic for both Ukraine.

Reintegration of the annexed regions is becoming a dire issue and the more time is wasted on this process the more the cause becomes a lost one. These regions will need to rebuild where they were destroyed, or Ukraine will face the same East-West divide that started Euromaidan to begin with. Ideologically too, these regions need to be felt welcomed back – any rhetoric that they shouldn't have voting rights only pushes the region further into Russia's arms. If Ukraine pushes these regions away and does not want to reintegrate them fully, then they will stay ideologically geared towards pro-Russian policies. Ukraine must decide on how they want to proceed with the people on the other side of the conflict that hold Ukrainian citizenship. This is a fundamental issue that the international community has to be involved in. Renegotiating this crisis means Ukrainians may have to give the Eastern front more independence – but if it starves off a full-scale civil war, it might be worth it.

The international community – including France and Germany – have a role to play here. Ukraine and Russia certainly are not the ones pushing for the continuation of the Minsk II, and they're the ones that are supposed to be implementing it. The international community and state mediators can still steer this conflict towards calmer shores and a peaceful resolution. If they want to solve this issue though, they need to do it *now*. The lack of focus and commitment to actually solving this crisis by the international community speaks volumes. If they really care about Ukrainians on both sides, they wouldn't waste the precious time available and the current economic circumstances that Russia faces. It is hard to see another opportunity like this coming.

About the author:

Katherine Brown is an international security researcher and non-profit grant writer. She has written extensively on the Ukrainian Crisis and transatlantic security affairs, and holds a Master's in European Union Studies from the University of Illinois. She previously served on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Drone Working Group in conjunction with the University of Pittsburgh.