

The Ukraine Crisis: A Tale of Misperceptions, Miscalculations & Mismanagement Is There Still Time to Avoid Permanent Damage to the European Security Order?



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Summary

The paper argues that the EU spectacularly failed to predict Russia's reaction to the Ukraine crisis mainly because of its lack of appreciation of the continued relevance of hard power in global politics. However, even if Putin's reaction was the result of his perception that the West crossed a Russian "red line", there are clearly aggressive elements in his strategy. It is, therefore, of critical importance that the West tries to put a lid on the Ukraine crisis through a set of proposals that would allow both sides to agree to a permanent ceasefire and take several steps back in a way that would allow them to save face. Europe should avoid an unnecessary confrontation and rivalry with Russia that might consume a significant amount of the EU's finite foreign policy and security resources. The avoidance of such a confrontation cannot be achieved by appeasing Russia but through a combination of containment and engagement.

The crisis in Ukraine is indeed Europe's most serious post-Cold War security challenge since the Balkan Wars. After the shooting down of Flight MH17 the situation has escalated, efforts to resolve the crisis through diplomatic means have met with very limited success so far and the end result may very well be a new Cold War of unknown duration and consequences between the West and Russia.

To better manage the next stages of the crisis, it is important to understand how the situation escalated to this degree. In the early days following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, US strategy was to 'slice off' the former Soviet empire and make sure that Russia would not challenge American supremacy again. As Simon Serfaty argues, 'the mistake then was to pay inefficient attention to Russia's legitimate interests and concerns. Now that Russia looks stronger, the mistake would be to exaggerate the significance and relevance of those interests'. Alexander Lukin points out that after the collapse of the Soviet Union the West 'had two options: either make a serious attempt to assimilate Russia into the Western system or wrest away piece after piece of its former sphere of influence. It chose the latter'. Indeed, Thucydides would have immediately recognized it as a classic case of the 'strong imposing his will and the weak accepting his fate'.

A number of former Soviet republics or 'allies' in Eastern Europe were invited to join NATO and the EU (two different 'creatures' in Russian eyes in terms of threat perception and acceptability, although this has been changing recently). Nicu Popescu (EU-ISS) argues that Moscow perceives any steps towards economic integration as a threat to its broader geopolitical goals; Patrick Nopens points out that as a reaction to the Eastern Partnership and other Western initiatives 'Russia began looking for an alternative project where it could be a regional hegemon in the post-Soviet space'. It would be unfair to deny the positive effects of the strategy of enlargement for stability in Europe, but when the US began promoting the rise to power of strongly pro-Western parties in countries such as Georgia and Ukraine, it became clear that the strategy had run its natural course and that further enlargement would be quite problematic.

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The EU's Eastern Partnership was conceived as a substitute for membership and, although a useful tool, it must be used with caution, taking into consideration Europe's wider policies regarding its neighborhood and relations with Russia. According to the IISS, 'While the Eastern Partnership may not have been directed against Russia, it was easy to see how Moscow might have viewed the programme as a challenge to its interests'. Michael Leigh argued that the Eastern Partnership 'contributed to a dramatic escalation of regional tensions in the case of Ukraine'.

In the case of Ukraine, there is the strong impression that the Eastern Partnership has been heavily influenced by a number of EU member states, which did not include the traditional great European powers. An immediate priority for the EU should be the development of a coherent position on Russia, with the aim of stabilizing the EU-Russia relationship and preparing the ground for more substantial improvement in the Putin or post-Putin era (although Mr. Putin could in principle stay in power for another decade). To those arguing that the political objective of sanctions should be soft regime change, the answer is that this is a very risky game. Even if this policy is successful, there is no guarantee (or at least some decent probability) that the next Russian leader will be more moderate and democratic. Actually he is more likely to be more mistrustful and feeling under siege.

Unsurprisingly, the Russian elites were concerned about Russia's de facto new status as a second-rate power. After Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power at the expense of democracy and the momentous mistakes of the American neoconservatives (especially the war in Iraq) which seriously damaged America's image and power, it was to be expected that Putin would try to reverse Russia's decline at every opportunity.

In this context, Europe and the US have consistently failed to understand Putin, the 'siloviki's' way of thinking and objectives and, as a result, have underestimated their preparedness to use force to achieve their objectives. As a consequence, in the case of Ukraine, Europe and the US have mishandled the crisis. There was ample warning of Russia's strong reaction that went apparently unnoticed. In 2008, for example, Russia attempted to use Kosovo's de-facto independence after the NATO intervention as a justification for obtaining international recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's new status. Of course, NATO tried to argue that Kosovo was an 'exceptional case' which should not create a precedent in international affairs. In comparing the Kosovo situation to that of Crimea, no real threat against Russian-speaking citizens was documented in Crimea, whereas the Kosovar Albanian community was facing a long-term tangible security threat. It appears however, that such subtle differences may have been lost to a non-Western audience. In any case, during the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, Putin sent a very clear message that he was prepared to use

military force to promote his foreign policy objectives, even in a country that was perceived by Russia of far less strategic significance than Ukraine.

Despite President Barack Obama's efforts for a 'reset' of relations with Russia, the US failed to take into consideration Russian interests in two other cases: Libya and Syria. With regards to Libya, Western powers (probably justifiably) went beyond the provisions of UNSC Resolution 1973 in supporting regime change in Libya (although the absence of a follow-up strategy by the international community contributed to the transformation of Libya to a failed state), but ignored Russian interests in that country and Moscow's need to be treated as an important player and be given a seat at the decision-making table. Efforts to manage the Syrian civil war have been unsuccessful thus far for a variety of reasons, and US and European reluctance to intervene militarily in that conflict gave Putin the opportunity to win the first round, boosting both Russia's international image and his own self-confidence. The Syrian conflict has since taken a turn for the worse with the hardly surprising strengthening of ISIS.

**The Ukraine Crisis: A Tale of Misperceptions, Miscalculations & Mismanagement
Is There Still Time to Avoid Permanent Damage to the European Security Order?**

Ukraine has been a semi-permanent point of friction between the West and Russia throughout the twenty-first century. The roots of the Ukrainian crisis go back to 2004, or perhaps even to the creation of an independent Ukraine in 1991. It is important to note that there has been a complicated relationship between Russia and Ukraine for much of the twentieth century. The current political and economic crisis in Ukraine began at a time of limited US interest in the post-Soviet space (in view of the strategic pivot to Asia) and of a deep, structural European crisis also affecting EU global and regional policies, including the rather limited political interest in and financial support available for the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy.

Under those unfavourable circumstances, the EU decided at the Vilnius Summit (November 2013) to make a rather half-hearted attempt to draw Ukraine – a country heavily indebted and highly dependent on Russian energy – closer to a European orbit. The financial support that would have been provided through the proposed agreement, in order to balance the costs of opening further the Ukrainian internal market to European firms, was so low that it would have guaranteed a deterioration of the Ukrainian economy in the short term, only for the country to enjoy some long-term benefits if all went according to plan. This European initiative obviously underestimated the perceived importance in Russian eyes of a friendly or, at worst, neutral Ukraine – long seen as a buffer state of substantial strategic importance to Russia- and a country where no vital European or American interests were at stake (although some European countries, or several policymakers in the US make disagree with that assessment); now, of course, Western credibility is on the line. Ignoring the fact that Putin had a strong motive, the means and, now, the opportunity to react strongly to European overtures towards Ukraine has been a fundamental mistake at the strategic level. In fact, Europe's "Ukraine policy" was probably the closest social sciences could get to natural sciences as the Russian reaction was as predictable as the result of any routine physics experiment.

Tactical blunders quickly followed. First, European countries offered virtually unconditional support to all opposition forces, irrespective of their ideology and democratic credentials, even to the extent of senior European politicians openly supporting the protesters in Maidan Square through physical presence. Secondly, after the collapse of the agreement of 21 February 2014 and the ousting of President Yanukovich, major EU countries acquiesced to the formation of a temporary government composed almost exclusively of pro-European (but at the same time strongly anti-Russian) political parties. To make matters worse, a number of ultra-right-wing politicians and parties either became coalition partners or were appointed in key positions by the new government. One of their first actions was to draft a new law, although never ratified, limiting the rights of [Russian] minorities.

It is of little practical importance that there was no real threat against the Russian minority either in eastern Ukraine or in Crimea. Putin never hid his intentions to re-build Russia's sphere of influence in the former Soviet space, with Ukraine as the crown jewel, thus a most convenient pretext was given to Moscow to move forward with a not very subtle, but well planned and executed (para)military operation to reclaim Crimea. Of course the Crimea referendum was illegal, but the overthrow of Yanukovich (whose legitimacy had virtually vanished as a result of the death of several dozen protesters) provided Moscow with yet another convenient excuse to intervene.

Russia may not have been directly responsible for the tragic loss of Flight MH17 –most likely shot-down by pro-Russian insurgents, who probably believed they were targeting a Ukrainian military plane, but bears responsibility for transferring advanced weapon systems to the insurgents and for refusing to acknowledge its share of the blame, whereas both sides failed to exploit this tragic event in order to de-escalate the Ukrainian crisis.

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It should also have been clear to Western officials that Russia is not a postmodern power. Putin is playing by traditional foreign policy rules using hard rather than soft power (John Mearsheimer: ‘the two sides have been operating with different playbooks: Russia with a realist one and the EU with a liberal one’) and it should have been foreseen that he would probably jump at the opportunity to re-take Crimea and bargain with the West from a position of strength. At the same time, he managed to spectacularly improve his domestic standings by rallying the Russian population around the nationalist cause.

Criticizing the West’s management of the crisis should not be perceived as an attempt to exonerate Russia. Despite the fact that there were miscalculations on both sides in the conflict, it is clear that Russia has violated a cardinal rule of international politics, namely that borders should not be changed by force. Such revisionist behavior is the cause of insecurity amongst neighboring European countries that have a difficult historical relationship with Russia. Although the prospect of Russian military aggression (including what Wolfgang Ischinger calls “just-below-Article 5” scenarios) against the Baltic states, let alone Poland, appears quite unlikely, such concerns need of course to be addressed in the context of a supranational union such as the EU or a military alliance such as NATO. The temptation may be strong for the latter to find a new *raison d’être*, but it would be a grave strategic mistake to return to a role NATO knows well how to play, but that may not be well suited for the security challenges of the twenty-first century. NATO remains a key institution for European and, indeed, global security and should not spend its ‘limited’ resources in a Cold War with Russia before exhausting every other reasonable alternative.

Upon examination of the current situation after the shooting-down of MH17, the West justifiably felt it had no other option but to impose heavier sanctions on Moscow. In return, Moscow attempted to retaliate by hinting that an energy war next fall or winter would not be out of question. In the Wales Summit (September 2014), NATO discussed proposals for the increase of its ‘military footprint’ in Eastern Europe, including the re-orientation of its antimissile shield (a system of uncertain utility if rapprochement between the West and Iran takes a permanent form) from the Middle East towards Russia. It adopted a Readiness Action Plan according to which:

We will enhance the responsiveness of our NATO Response Force (NRF) ... will establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), a new Allied joint force that will be able to deploy within a few days to respond to challenges that arise, particularly at the periphery of NATO's territory. We will also establish an appropriate command and control presence and some in-place force enablers on the territories of eastern Allies at all times, with contributions from Allies on a rotational basis, focusing on planning and exercising collective defence scenarios. If required, they will also facilitate reinforcement of Allies located at NATO's periphery for deterrence and collective defence ... We will also ensure that our Allied forces maintain the adequate readiness and coherence needed to conduct NATO's full range of missions, including deterring aggression against NATO Allies and demonstrating preparedness to defend NATO territory...Allies also remain committed in their support to the territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova. (Wales Summit Declaration)

The Ukraine Crisis: A Tale of Misperceptions, Miscalculations & Mismanagement

Is There Still Time to Avoid Permanent Damage to the European Security Order?

Exactly how this Plan will be implemented in practice remains, of course, to be seen.

The cost of the imposed sanctions will not be negligible for the EU, which is still trying to exit from its own deep economic crisis. Energy (inter)dependence is a condition that cannot be changed in the short-term. The additional political cost involved concern the 'expedited' rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing and the complications in managing the Syrian conflict or the Iranian nuclear programme with Russia playing spoiler. Moscow can play that game quite effectively, but, unlike China, doesn't have the power to seriously challenge the *status quo*. Of course, the cost of any confrontation with the West would not be low for Russia either, as its economy is vulnerable to international capital transfers, it needs substantial foreign investment to modernize its energy infrastructure, and remains heavily dependent on the export of energy products and could, thus, not afford the 'loss' of the European market. In addition, subsidizing Crimea may perhaps be affordable for Moscow but it will not be cheap.

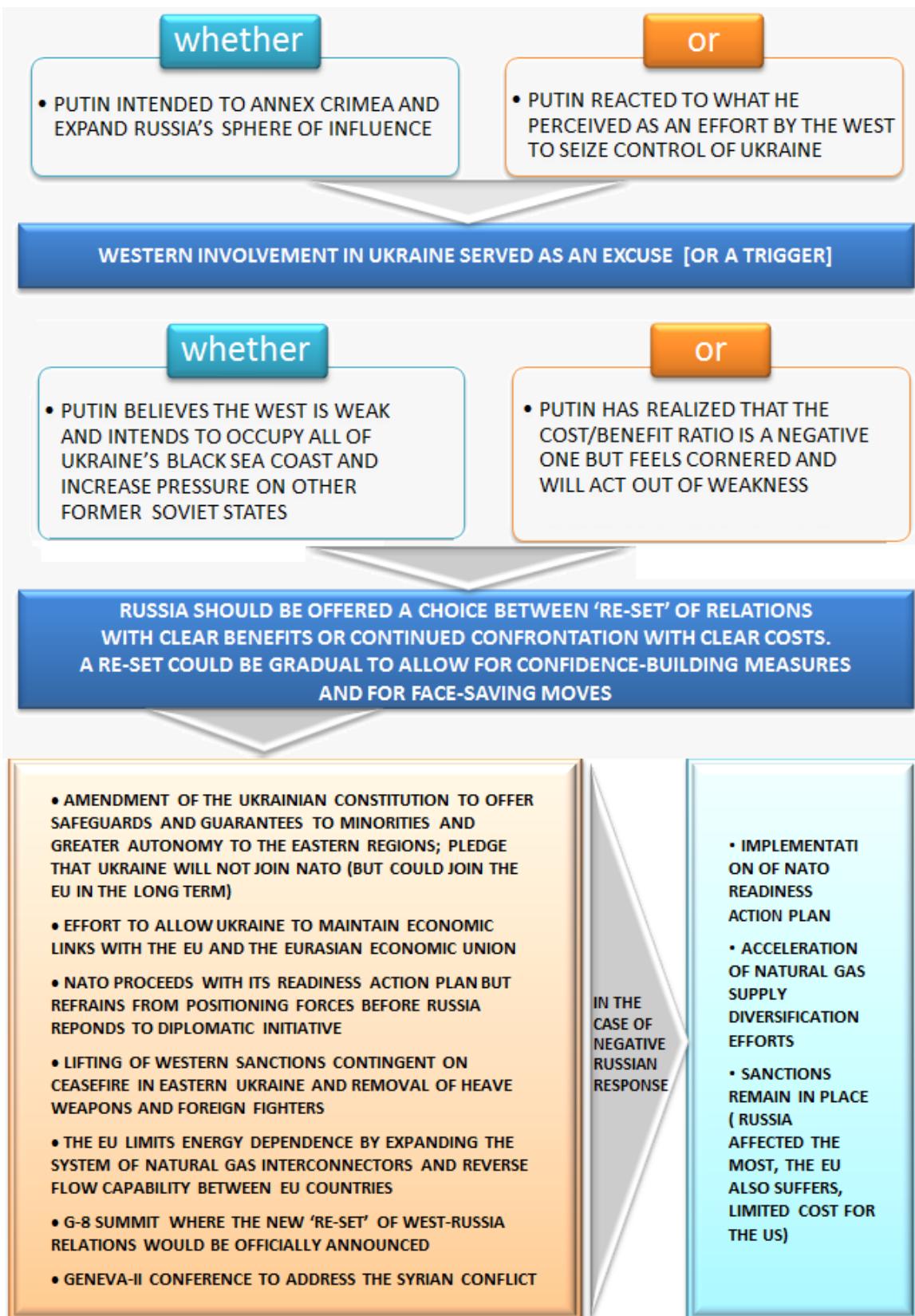
As continued instability and even further escalation cannot be ruled out, it is of critical importance that the West tries to put a lid on the crisis through a set of proposals that would allow both sides to agree to a permanent ceasefire and to save face (especially for Russia that consideration is of greater relevance). Such proposals would concurrently engage Russia, Ukraine, the EU and the US in a diplomatic exercise with the objective of building confidence, repairing the damage to the European security architecture and preparing a roadmap for the reconstruction of a strategic partnership between the EU and Russia (provided, of course, that Moscow is also thinking along the same lines). Such a partnership should also include a number of clear and enforceable red lines. As Michael Leigh argues, the EU 'needs both to uphold the principles that have generally ensured peace and stability in post-Cold War Europe and to be pragmatic in taking Russians' perceptions of its own interests and of the shifting balance of power in Europe, into account.'

Would Russia react positively to such an opening? As already mentioned, despite early gains, Vladimir Putin is beginning to realize that the long-term costs of his Ukrainian 'adventure' will be quite high for his country, since he has been forced to push Russia deeper into China's embrace through an energy deal that will eventually make Moscow the junior partner in that relationship. The annexation of Crimea and the so-called "Putin Doctrine" have caused concern in former Soviet states with large Russian populations in their territory (for example Kazakhstan), are hurting the Russian economy and Russia is probably about to 'lose' permanently most of Ukraine. In this context, Popescu comments that "certain trends that Russia sought to prevent are accelerating: there is a stronger US and NATO commitment to central Europe, greater investment in energy security by the EU, an anti-Russian mood across Ukraine, and a decline in FDI in the Russian economy. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have now all signed Association Agreements with the EU." Putin's miscalculation and the fact that he has limited room for maneuver, having backed himself to a corner, make this an even more serious challenge for European security.

Prominent thinkers of the realist school have been arguing that a declining great power with an aging population and a one-dimensional economy did not in fact need to be contained and could be accommodated at an acceptable cost. On the other hand, Russia may be weak and insecure and, as Sven Biscop argues 'in reality Putin is acting more out of weakness than out of strength, making it up as he goes along rather than executing a master plan'. However, Russia is strong enough to heavily influence developments in its Eastern neighborhood, hence the need for the EU to seek at least a modus vivendi if a strategic partnership is not currently possible.

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Is There Still Time to Avoid Permanent Damage to the European Security Order?

MANAGING THE RUSSIAN CHALLENGE TO THE EUROPEAN SECURITY ORDER: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



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Is There Still Time to Avoid Permanent Damage to the European Security Order?

REPAIRING THE DAMAGE

Admittedly, and perhaps surprisingly, we find ourselves closer to a twentieth century-style Cold War between the West and Russia than to a strategic relationship better suited in addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century.

If European involvement in the Ukraine crisis was a deliberate [collective] EU decision to challenge Moscow's influence in Ukraine, both the strategy and the timing were poorly chosen. It looks, however, that this was more a case of miscalculations and mismanagement, in addition to strong anti-Russian perceptions in certain European countries. The mismanagement of the crisis in Ukraine is a good example of EU strategic myopia in failing to foresee Russia's reaction and of the misperception that geopolitics and hard power no longer matter in European security affairs. EU foreign policy institutions should draw the necessary conclusions for future use.

Values are still important for the EU, the world's first -and only- normative power, but this approach has its limitations in a world where interests and hard power still weigh heavily. Furthermore, many EU member states view the cost of heavier sanctions against Russia –or the long-term continuation of those already imposed- as unacceptably high, unless Russia continues to create problems in Ukraine.

It is often argued that one should try to understand the current Russian mindset. [Although, according to Henry Kissinger, understanding Russian history and psychology has not been a strong point of U.S. policymakers. Neither understanding U.S. values and psychology are Putin's strong suits.] For Russia existential issues are at stake and -rightly or wrongly- it perceives itself to be on the defensive. Also, Russian elites are obsessed about NATO, whose expansion is –in Russian eyes- at the core of encirclement efforts by the West, and also one of the top two items in Russia's threat assessment; the second concern is radical Islamism; such a threat perception should, in principle, facilitate cooperation with the West.

According to Kissinger, 'Russia must accept that to try to force Ukraine into a satellite status, and thereby move Russia's borders again, would doom Moscow to repeat its history of self-fulfilling cycles of reciprocal pressures with Europe and the United States. The West must understand that, to Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country' and '...should function as a bridge between Russia and the West'.

A permanently destabilized Ukraine – a new frozen conflict in the former Soviet space - would constitute an important problem for both Europe and Russia, whereas for the US (for which the cost of sanctions is considerably lower) the weakening of ties between Berlin and Moscow may not necessarily be perceived as a catastrophic development. An escalation of the crisis would leave both the EU and Russia weakened. The cost for Russia would probably be heavier (especially in a period of falling oil prices), but it may be willing to pay such a price for what it perceives as a core interest.

It is therefore urgent that EU member states reach an agreement on a common position vis-à-vis Russia. It is also imperative that the EU tries to convince Russia to gradually abandon zero sum game perceptions and adopt a win-win approach by emphasizing common interests and, if possible, seek a success story (such as the resumption of talks on Syria and agreement on a diplomatic solution that would also address the ISIS problem). Additionally, Medvedev's proposal for a new Security Architecture in Europe could be used as a basis for consultations.

The Ukraine Crisis: A Tale of Misperceptions, Miscalculations & Mismanagement

Is There Still Time to Avoid Permanent Damage to the European Security Order?

Should Moscow demonstrate the necessary good will and cooler heads prevail in the West, the Ukrainian issue could be resolved with a federal system that would provide reasonable autonomy to the Russian-speaking regions.¹ Crimea is a thorny issue. It will probably remain a frozen conflict, not recognized by the international community. In the words of Sven Biscop, ‘What EU policy will not achieve is the return of Crimea to Ukraine. The peninsula will join South Ossetia, Abkhazia and others in the category of territories whose proclaimed status we do not recognize but also do not actively attempt to alter’. The issue, however, is of wider importance because a number of analysts argue that it could potentially become an example for leaders in other regions that the Western order is weak and that they should wait for the right moment to promote their interests by force if necessary. Therefore, even if Putin cannot afford to look weak in the Ukraine crisis (and let the pro-Russian insurgents –also a useful lever to apply pressure- be defeated militarily), neither can the West appear as appeasing Russia. This rather limited room for maneuver on both sides makes efforts to find a solution more difficult but not impossible.

IMMEDIATE STEPS (on the basis of the Minsk Protocol)

- Removal of heavy weapons and foreign fighters from Eastern Ukraine;
- Deeper involvement of the OSCE in the context of the Minsk ceasefire process;
- Independent investigation on the tragic fate of MH17;
- Establishment of a Wise Men Group of senior (former) statesmen to prepare a roadmap for EU-Russia, US-Russia and NATO-Russia relations;
- Negotiation of a permanent solution to the natural gas problem;
- Need for Track-II diplomacy (the Boisto agenda with a 24-step plan to resolve the Ukraine crisis is a good example);
- Discussion of next steps in arms control (CFE, INF?, need for CBMs)

¹ On this point but also other related issues, the author benefitted greatly from his participation in the September 2014 Annual Conference of the EU-Institute for Security Studies, and especially the top-quality breakout session on ‘Eastern Neighbours and Russia: EU Dilemmas’.

The Ukraine Crisis: A Tale of Misperceptions, Miscalculations & Mismanagement Is There Still Time to Avoid Permanent Damage to the European Security Order?

The Ukraine imbroglio is also linked to a highly controversial concept. Seeking a certain '*droit de regard*' in a great power's 'near abroad' (along the lines of the Brezhnev doctrine) may look like a nineteenth or twentieth century concept, but its appeal is not limited to Russia, as in the twenty-first century interests and hard power continue to weigh more than values. On the other hand, countries should have the right to decide about their future, even in the case of a country with a rather divided population like Ukraine, and it is urgent that viable compromise solutions between principles and hard realities be found. In this context, the Finnish or Austrian model with possible future membership in the EU but not in NATO might be worth considering. Finally, the domestic causes of the crisis -weakness of state institutions in Ukraine and deep distrust for political elites-should be addressed as a priority. In this context, the EU should offer more substantial economic assistance, support anti-corruption efforts and promote political reforms.

Obviously, it is much easier to cooperate with like-minded partners, who share many common values. The more challenging part of diplomacy, however, is to try to find common ground with more difficult neighbours with different values or what may be considered as unpleasant practices but with a number of common interests. There are obvious differences on a range of topics and diverging short and medium-term interests between the West (although, of course, there may be differences between the US and Europe or among Europeans on several issues) and Russia. Given, however, the energy [inter]dependence and the [rather] converging long-term geostrategic

interests of the EU and [a 'satisfied' and integrated] Russia (for example, managing the challenges of Islamic extremism and of rapidly increasing Chinese power), there are many good reasons to avoid further escalation of the crisis. Of course, accidents and miscalculations constitute an integral part of international politics, as demonstrated by the explosive outbreak of the First World War exactly one hundred years ago.

It is of vital importance that Europe avoids an unnecessary confrontation and rivalry with Russia that might consume a significant amount of the EU's finite foreign policy and security resources. Such resources could be used in a more efficient way in dealing with other urgent security challenges in Europe's neighborhood. Of course, the avoidance of such a confrontation cannot be achieved by appeasing Russia but through a combination of containment and engagement (and a fine balance between deterrence and diplomacy, as Patrick Nopens put it). And in order to normalize relations, it always takes two to tango.

'We need a double-track strategy that denies Russia opportunities to split Europe while we pursue a dialogue with Putin about co-operation, difficult as that may be... In the long-run, we will have to re-open discussions about building a more resilient European security infrastructure. Any sort of larger agreement with Russia would have to be contingent on Russia accepting its neighbours' sovereignty. There are compromises to be made, but not on the fundamental principles that were agreed in Helsinki, in Paris and in the two decades that followed.'

(Wolfgang Ischinger)

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The Ukraine Crisis: A Tale of Misperceptions, Miscalculations & Mismanagement
Is There Still Time to Avoid Permanent Damage to the European Security Order?

Additional Reading:

- Sven Biscop, *Winter is coming-Will spring follow? Ukraine and the future of EU-Russia relations*, 3/9/2014
- Wolfgang Ischinger, 'Ukraine's wake-up call should yield a twin-track EU security strategy', *Europe's World*, Autumn 2014
- Henry Kissinger, 'To settle the Ukraine crisis, start at the end', *Washington Post*, March 5, 2014
- Michael Leigh, 'A New Strategy for Europe's Neighborhood', GMF Policy Brief, September 2014
- Alexander Lukin, 'What the Kremlin is Thinking', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2014, pp. 85-93
- John Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault', *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2014
- Patrick Nopens, *Beyond Russia's 'Versailles Syndrome'*, Egmont Security Policy Brief no. 58, November 2014,
- Nicu Popescu, 'First lessons from the Ukrainian crisis', EU-ISS, October 2014
- Simon Serfaty, 'Why we need to be patient with Russia', *Europe's World*, Summer 2014
- *Strategic Survey 2014*, IISS

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