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Minsk Process: Can the Success of the Minsk Platform for Negotiations Be Further Developed?

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The Minsk platform for negotiations has become a manifestation of success of Belarusian diplomacy, which has benefited from a unique mix of international factors by facilitating peace talks on Ukraine, improving the country's security, and altering Belarus's foreign policy image. Minsk's contribution to crisis settlement in the east of Ukraine has become a significant step forward on the way towards achieving "situational neutrality". However, as of today, virtually all the capacity of the platform for negotiations appears to have been used up: the conflict in Ukraine is taking the shape of a protracted one, and further negotiations within the framework of the existing format only have modest results. In order for Belarus to consolidate and expand its status as a donor of stability and security, as well as to establish its de facto neutral position, new possibilities must be found amid the current geopolitical environment. This policy paper analyzes the current international situation, explores prerequisites and opportunities for initiating a negotiation process with a view to de-escalating tensions between the West and Russia, and offers recommendations on incorporating the process into the "Minsk platform."

Is a New Helsinki Process Feasible?

Currently international relations are going through a tough phase characterized by the high degree of distrust between Russia and the West and the growth of their military potentials in Eastern Europe. Many scholars are therefore encouraged to draw parallels with the Cold War era.

Indeed, like in the 1950s-60s, the system of international treaties is undergoing erosion. The post-war Yalta–Potsdam system of international relations is becoming increasingly dysfunctional, whereas no new international regimes that would reflect the contemporary balance of powers have been established so far. International organizations are unable to produce a significant impact on activities of opposing superpowers. Just as back in the times of the Cold War, the geopolitical confrontation is

aggravated by the conflict of values that is directly manifested in propaganda and false information campaigns. Russia and the West have limited their contacts in the economic, political, and military sectors.

However, important differences are also in place. First, Russia is no longer an actor with the scale of influence identical to that of the entire Soviet Union. It possesses a limited toolkit to implement its foreign policy (although now it does not refrain from threats to use nuclear weapons). Second, unlike in the times of the Cold War, operational level decision-making has been out of balance: there is no single center to make weighted decisions, which would have capacity to impact international relations. This could trigger a sharp escalation of tensions.

Furthermore, despite the confrontation-based rhetoric, mutual sanctions, and accusations of interference in internal affairs, a window of opportunities has obviously opened to reduce the degree of tensions and establish critical dialogue between Russia and the West. The prime reason for this is the election of Donald Trump as the new U.S. president and resulting rethinking of the American foreign policy strategy. The most influential players in the European Union will likely be reluctant to further increase the degree of confrontation with Russia. On the one hand, the West may become less consolidated when it comes to the deterrence of Russia. On the other hand, both the U.S. and the EU appear to be giving up on messianic foreign policies and turning to addressing pragmatic tasks. On the whole, international relations are becoming less predictable. It compromises security but opens up additional possibilities for innovative action. Such possibilities seem to be in store for small states, too.

Just as in the run up to the Helsinki Process, Russia is interested in normalizing its relations with the West and fixing the new borderlines and spheres of influence (including the confirmation of the status of Crimea as its integral part). Therefore, it is undertaking steps to create a framework for making arrangements with the U.S. and key European countries. For instance, by way of increasing its importance in the resolution of the Syrian issue, which is a source of serious problems for the EU. Russia is also seeking direct contacts with the U.S. via military-to-military contacts in order to prevent incidents (such as the downing of a Russian aircraft by Turkish military).

For its part, the West may turn out to be not so much interested in revising the rules of international relations at the same table with Moscow:

- Unlike the USSR, Russia does not pose a direct military threat to the U.S.'s allies in Europe, let alone the U.S.;

- Russia's weight in the global economy and technology is so insignificant that its sanctions will not produce any palpable impact on key international players;
- Ideologically, Russia is no longer a producer of ideas that would catch the minds of citizens of other countries and their opinion leaders.

Drawing on these considerations, it appears that the likelihood of a new Yalta (division of spheres of influence), on which Moscow insists, is minute.

Nevertheless, Russia can pose a threat to former Soviet republics, which have either become EU and NATO members, or strive for membership — such as Georgia and Ukraine. The latter's experience has shown that the sense of vulnerability can encourage the Kremlin to pursue active military action, which might bring about a regional crisis of the scale unprecedented since the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, Russia's nuclear potential is an essential security factor on a global scale, which is a reason for Western governments to pay heed to Moscow's interests and reckon with them, at least in their military planning.

The analysis of the events in Georgia (2008), Syria (use of chemical weapons in 2013), Ukraine (2014), and Turkey (shootdown of the Russian aircraft in 2015) suggests that important geopolitical players are lacking a clear understanding of tolerance levels ("red lines") in international politics. This makes international security and strategic stability extremely fragile.

Therefore, the priority matter on the agenda is not spheres of influence or consolidation of borders. It is rather the need to define and coordinate countries' interests, their strategic vulnerabilities, and so-called "red lines". The latter, if violated, may entail further escalation of tensions, right down to a military conflict.

Minsk Process as a Conflict De-Escalation Tool

Minsk can initiate a conference that would address these priority issues and become a logical continuation of the peacemaking platform to settle the conflict in Ukraine. During the initial phase, it could feature security advisers of the heads of state in Europe, the U.S., and Russia, as well as leading global experts in international relations and security.

Therefore, the central tasks of the "Minsk Process" during the incipient stage could be as follows:

- Detailed analysis of the perception of threats by all participants of the confrontation and stakeholders (the U.S., Russia, EU, Ukraine, and other Eastern Partnership countries);

- Identification of key vulnerabilities within the U.S.–EU–Russia triangle, as well as critical threats (“red lines”) capable of causing an armed clash;
- Development of detailed measures to de-escalate and prevent incidents;
- Elaboration of new arrangements to build confidence between the key players.

If the expert dimension of the “Minsk Process” proves successful, the ministerial level may be the target for the second phase, where an international treaty may be drafted, to be later signed by heads of state.

Why Minsk?

Minsk seems an ideal platform not only because of the continuity with the process on Ukraine, but also due to convenience for both Russian and Western representatives. In addition to this, Belarus has extra potential in the facilitation of negotiations as a state that is well aware of Moscow’s strategic concerns, as well as the security situation in the region, and actively seeking improvement of its relations with the West.

Furthermore, in 2017, Belarus is holding the presidency in the Central European Initiative (CEI), which aims at preventing the appearance of new dividing lines in Europe. As part of its CEI presidency, Minsk focuses on the promotion of connectivity in Big Europe. The “Minsk Process” is fully in line with these purposes.

Factors favouring the “Minsk Process”:

- The status of Minsk as a neutral platform for negotiations on Ukraine.
- Acknowledgement of this role by key global players.
- Timely articulation of the “Minsk Process” idea by the Belarusian leadership (statement by Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Uladzimir Makey).
- Consistent process of normalization of Belarus’s relations with the West.
- Belarus’s non-participation in the propaganda war on anyone’s side.
- Exclusive understanding of Russia and its perceptions of threats (expertise on Russia) by Minsk.
- Experience of Belarus in organizing top-level negotiations.

Factors impeding the “Minsk Process”:

- Formally status of Belarus as a non-neutral state.
- Certain problems in Belarusian-Russian relations.
- Reputation of Belarus as a closed authoritarian country with complicated relations with the West.
- Shortage of resources in Belarus for full-scale shuttle diplomacy.

Belarus's interest in the success of such a process is obvious: the country benefits from the relaxation of tensions between Russia and the West; this "lessening of tensions" broadens the spectrum of opportunities in foreign policy and enables the country to consolidate its status as a security and stability donor and build up its influence in international politics. The "Minsk Process", just as the negotiations platform on Ukraine, is not only a matter of image. It is above all a matter of survival for the state in the current geopolitical environment, as well as a reflection of propensity to assert its interests.

What Needs to Be Done in the Near Future

1. The idea of a negotiation process focusing on the perception and assessment of threats and confidence-building measures in Europe needs to be elaborated via diplomatic channels. This work would complement the effort of the recent German OSCE chairmanship, which featured the first steps in discussing the topic. The link to the German initiative will additionally reinforce Minsk's voice.

2. High quality media coverage of the topic should be ensured. This way the Minsk Process agenda (relaxation of tensions, de-escalation, and compatibility) could become the focal point of Belarus's foreign policy for years to come. It will enable the country, inter alia, to avoid conflict-causing rhetoric associated with the deployment of NATO infrastructure on Belarus's borders, problems with Russia, and cut short the media effect of the large-scale military exercises "Zapad-2017".

3. Belarus's participation in multilateral formats should be maximized to ensure effective public promotion of the "Minsk Process" concept. The forthcoming opportunities include a CEI ministerial meeting in Minsk in June, OSCE PA session in Minsk (July), plenary high-level session within the framework of the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons (September), Eastern Partnership summit in Brussels (November), meeting of the heads of state of the CEI member states (December), and the session of the UN General Assembly. It will also be advisable to use Alyona Kupchyna's nomination for the post of the OSCE Secretary General to promote the concept of the "Minsk Process".

4. The date and list of participants of the inaugural Minsk Process conference should be agreed. Key topics to be explored at the conference can be initially worked out as part of the expert components of the events listed in the previous paragraph. The main participants of the inaugural conference are proposed to include acting security and foreign policy advisers of the heads of state and governments from the U.S., Russia, and

the EU, as well as the Eastern Partnership, specialists at respective ministries, leading foreign policy and security experts at major independent think tanks, as well as academic institutions.

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