CEPS COMMENTARY
Thinking ahead for Europe

How to save Ukraine

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2 May 2014

Ukraine is disintegrating before our very eyes. Acting President Alexander Turchinov has officially declared that Kyiv is powerless to resume control of Donetsk and Lugansk, where bands of separatists occupy public buildings, raising Russian flags. The Geneva Quad agreement of 17 April – signed by Ukraine, the EU, Russia and the US and decreeing that public buildings be liberated – is ignored. The viability of the presidential election, scheduled for May 25th, is threatened by boycotts announced in some of the eastern regions, with calls for referendums instead on separation from Ukraine and accession to Russia.

The Geneva agreement had promising content and, crucially, quadripartite support. The only conceivable way now to save Ukraine is to enforce the agreement and to build upon it. A contrary tactic is emerging, to blame Russia for the non-implementation of Geneva, and for the US and EU to punish it with sanctions. Even if Russia is to be criticised, the tactic is not going to work. Russia will not be crippled by the sanctions, certainly not in the short-run, and meanwhile the scenario of growing anarchy and violence in the eastern regions brings nearer the prospect of a Russian 'peacekeeping' invasion.

There has to be a course correction by the Quad, or rather moves to ensure a serious enforcement of the Geneva agreement. The Quad should therefore agree to a reinforcement of the OSCE mission, or its replacement by a new tripartite peace and order enforcement mission. The key in either case has to be the physical coordination on the spot of Ukrainian, European and Russian uniformed and flagged troops, whether they are army, police or gendarmerie.

Recall Berlin 1945, with the patrol jeeps manned by a quad of British, French, Soviet and US troops. That scenario, of course, cannot serve as an actual model, but it does offer a little inspiration.

The necessary operation can be simply described. First dismantle and clean up the Maidan in Kyiv. It would suffice for just a few armoured personnel carriers, crucially carrying three big flags – Ukrainian, EU and Russian – to move in alongside a bulldozer and with trucks to carry away the debris.

Then move on into Donetsk and Lugansk, with larger contingents, but the same formula. Light military vehicles, jointly manned and flagged with Ukrainian, European and Russian colours, would escort bulldozers to demolish road blocks and barricades, and then demand evacuation of the public buildings. The thugs of Donetsk and Lugansk would not hold out for long. The operation would surely attract large public support.

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For the EU this would be a regular ESDP mission. The resources required are available. There is no lack of European military or policing capabilities for this kind of operation, and thanks to the EU's enlargement ten years ago, no shortage of Russian-speaking EU peacekeepers. The Quad would be reconvened to launch this reinforced operation, but neither US nor NATO presence in the joint operation is necessary technically nor plausible politically. For Russia this is the only way a temporary military presence in Ukraine could avoid the stigma of invasion. The failing Ukraine would be rescued by the huge political symbolism and reality of the three flags working together. The success of the tripartite operation would be grounds for suspension of the US as well as European sanctions against Russia.

Should the new tripartite brigade be authorised to use lethal force if there is resistance? Better not get into who would give the orders to fire. If there were a refusal to cooperate and a stand-off developed, the matter should be taken to the highest political level, for Russia with the EU and Ukraine together to order evacuation of the buildings explicitly both on the spot and with leader staking their case to the TV stations. This should overcome the weakness of the original Geneva agreement. If there is still no cooperation, the three parties would consult together on further steps.

This tripartite process should also lead on to further political understandings. The May 25th presidential election would go ahead correctly in the whole of Ukraine, but could be accompanied by referendums is some eastern regions with the following question:

> Would you prefer for your region to remain part of Ukraine alongside a process of constitutional reform to guarantee adequate regional safeguards on matters of language and decentralised competences; or would you prefer separating from Ukraine and joining Russia?

Opinion polls suggest that the majority would support the first alternative, even in Donetsk.

If the new post-May 25 authorities in Kyiv wish to go ahead and sign the DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement) with the EU, there should be completion of the process initiated at the June 2013 EU-Russia summit to examine any possible unintended harmful consequences of the DCFTA for Ukraine-Russian economic relations. In principle there should be no problem since the introduction of EU technical product standards by Ukraine still would normally allow for the voluntary application of these by Ukrainian enterprises, leaving Ukrainian exporters to Russia free to supply according to Russian (or Belarus-Russia-Kazakhstan customs union) standards.

The EU should now make such proposals with the utmost urgency. The US would be glad to see the EU, whose flags have been flying in Kyiv like the Russian ones in Donetsk, take up its responsibilities. Russia has already advocated trilateral solutions. The chances are that the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians would be mightily relieved. EU-Russia relations would get back on to a constructive track. This short-term action should also have long-term strategic consequences for the European order, if it initiated a switch by the EU and Russia into a cooperative modus operandi over their common neighbourhood. The immediate tripartite action here advocated would therefore also be a test of the sincerity of Russian discourse about Lisbon to Vladivostok.