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The Minsk II Agreement: Implications of a (Shaky) Ceasefire

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The Minsk II Agreement, reached on February 12, 2015 between Ukraine and the separatist provinces in the east of the country, with Russian participation and under German-French auspices, did not lead to an immediate ceasefire. The fighting initiated by the separatists intensified, and they succeeded in encircling and defeating the Ukrainian forces in the Debaltseve bulge. In addition, the separatist attack against the suburbs of the port of Mariupol was expanded. This chain of events was similar to those that followed attainment of the Minsk I agreement, signed on September 5, 2014 and extended on September 20, and designed to bring about a ceasefire between the separatist provinces, backed by Russia, and the government of Ukraine.

The fighting, which began some six months before the first agreement was signed, has thus far claimed 6,000 victims. Indeed, the fighting continued after Minsk I was signed and even after Minsk II. Before the first ceasefire, the West took various punitive measures against Russia, focusing primarily on economic sanctions. These measures, combined with the drop in the price of oil – which Russia claims was the result of an American initiative – caused significant damage to Russia, and this might well erode governmental stability. Indeed Russia, although it has not confirmed the severity of the economic crisis, was then facing the same dilemma it must confront now: ceasing its involvement in Ukraine in order to have the sanctions revoked or continuing its policy of actively impeding Ukraine's move toward the West.

The continued fighting after the signing of the Minsk I agreement did not stop the Ukrainian government's moves to strengthen its ties with the West. At the same time, the United States and Europe disagreed about how to confront the challenge presented by Russian policy on the crisis. The US administration supported the provision of military aid to Ukraine, while the Europeans preferred to pursue a solution achieved through diplomacy. The Minsk II agreement reflected the implementation of the European preference: German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande persuaded Russian President Vladimir Putin to agree to a ceasefire.

The terms of the agreement have remained unclear, and it is possible that conditions for lifting the sanctions were agreed on that were not made public. These putative terms would likely explain Russia's willingness to cooperate with the German-French initiative and agree to a ceasefire. The US position on lifting the sanctions on Russia is part of the uncertainty. Furthermore, after the agreement was signed it was reported that Germany had imposed additional sanctions on Russia, and it is possible that other countries will follow in its wake.

The fighting by separatists in eastern Ukraine is backed by Russia, which reportedly has planned moves and led them on the ground. Russia is thus working to establish the separatist provinces as a significant actor and position them as leverage against Ukraine's tilt to the West. In addition, Russia is using its influence over the separatists as a means of pressuring the West to ease the sanctions. In any case, the continued fighting, in which the separatist forces have caused significant losses to the Ukrainian army, harms the reputation of the European leaders who worked to promote the ceasefire.

Moreover, Russia is working to create a "frozen conflict" in Ukraine, as it did in other crises along its borders with former Soviet countries (Moldavia, Georgia, the Caucasus countries, the Baltic countries, and central Asian countries), which can be heated up if the need arises to protect Russian interests. In the case of Ukraine, Russia seeks to halt the threat inherent, from its point of view, in NATO's spread eastward. This trend is pushing Russia toward a militant response such as the response to the crisis that erupted in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine last year. On the one hand, Russia is seeking to have the sanctions imposed by the West lifted, and on the other, it can be expected to maintain the crisis in Ukraine in order to leverage it later to prevent Ukraine from joining Western organizations, i.e., NATO and perhaps the European Union as well. All of this is intended to undermine the pro-Western government in Ukraine and restore the country to Russia's sphere of influence.

It is still too early to assess the effectiveness of Russia's tactic, particularly in the context of the Ukrainian crisis. The economic sanctions have not been lifted. They are significant, and Russia is exploring ways of having them removed. Inter alia, it has expanded its competition with the West to other arenas, first and foremost the Middle East. It is stepping up its efforts to rehabilitate its status in the region, eroded in recent years because of the political turmoil in the Arab world, in order to press the West to ease its pressure over Russian policy in Ukraine. As part of these efforts, Russia has established a variety of collaborations with countries in the region, including in weapons sales. It has continued its support for the Bashar al-Assad regime, and has also avoided active participation the US-led coalition against the Islamic State.

Despite the grave economic crisis, Russia will likely not capitulate to Western pressures, as evidenced by the continuation of the fighting in eastern Ukraine between Russian-

backed forces and Western-backed government forces. Moreover, as Russia's policy in the Middle East in recent years has shown, its ambition to increase its influence and strengthen its ties with countries in the region will continue to serve as a counterweight to the tension with the West resulting from the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.