



Peace at any price? An overview of Donbas conflict and ongoing peace process

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Abstract

The conflict in Donbas has been one of the main problems for Ukraine over the past six years. Nevertheless, Kyiv has insisted its official standpoint on not to engage a direct talk with the leaders of so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) during this period. This is a critical point which allows Ukraine to consider Russia responsible for the conflict. However, the representatives of Ukraine and Russia at the last meeting in Minsk discussed to create an Advisory Council which can provide a ground for direct talk between Ukraine and the 'DPR' and 'LPR'. This study analyzes the pros and cons of the possible Advisory Council for Ukraine and Russia.

Introduction

The conflict in Donbas has been one of the main problems for Ukraine over the past six years. Nevertheless, Kyiv has insisted its official standpoint on not to engage a direct talk with the leaders of so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Lugansk People's Republic (LPR). Viewing them as merely puppets of Kremlin, Ukrainian officials refused to take separatist leaders into consideration. In contrast, Ukraine blamed Russia for the

instability in Donbas region and thereby discussed the conflict resolution with Kremlin officials so far. However, Zelensky signaled a new controversial move for the peace process, which triggered the new political unrest in the country. On March 11, the Head of Presidential Office of Ukraine, Andriy Yermak and the Deputy Head of Presidential Office of Russian Federation, Dmitry Kozak met in Minsk within the scope of Trilateral Contact Group to discuss the peace process of the prolonged Donbas Conflict. The most critical decision of the meeting was the agreement of the sides on the need of creation a new Advisory Council to perform the political settlement of the conflict. Although the Advisory Council has not been created yet, its importance stems from the fact that it foresees a format which allows direct contact between Ukrainian officials and the separatists leaders of the 'DNR' and the 'LNR'.

What Are the Demands of Ukraine And Russia And Why the Last Meeting in Minsk Matter?

To comprehend the significance of the Advisory Council one should go back to the first meeting of Trilateral Contact Group in Minsk in September 2014 and must examine the demands of the sides and their purposes. In this manner, first of all, let's take a brief look at why Kiev accepted the first meeting in Minsk and the 'accomplishments' it attained there. First, it should be noted that Ukraine was obliged to take part in the talks after heavy military losses particularly at the end of August 2014. It is beyond the main purpose of this analysis to elaborate on why the Ukrainian army had difficulties in dealing with the separatists but suffice to say that Russia's military assistance to the militants reached its peak at that time. Therefore, the Minsk ceasefire agreement was an opportunity for reorganization of Ukrainian army and even prevent further regional losses. Second, Ukraine achieved to negotiate with Russian Federation rather than with separatist during the meeting to avoid any possible depiction of 'civil war'. In other word, Kyiv demonstrated that

the war in Eastern Ukraine is the result of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine rather than an internal conflict. Third, which is also connected with the second one, was about guaranteeing the Western support at least in terms of sanctions against Russia. Ukraine maintained this standpoint successfully for the last six years.

In contrast, Russia tries to cover its involvement in Donbas from the beginning of the conflict to show that the instability in Ukraine originates from the country's domestic factors. Even during the first Minsk meeting, Russia insisted to make the separatist leaders a party in the negotiations and even though the Trilateral Contact Group officially composed of three actors (Ukraine, Russia and OSCE) Moscow managed to include the signatures of the separatists leader on the Minsk protocol. Obviously, Russia aims to hide its presence in Donbas while intending to become a mediator between the militants and Ukraine. Moreover, by introducing the conflict as Ukraine's internal affair, Moscow aims to lift Western sanctions that have continued since 2014.

Under these circumstances, creating the Advisory Council which paves the way for a direct dialogue between Kyiv officials and the leaders of the 'DPR' and 'LPR' become more of an issue. It can be claimed that Russia has three steps towards the conflict in Ukraine. First step which envisioned for the short term was the immediate prevention of Ukraine's distancing from Russia's sphere of influence. During this period, Russia not only supported the separatists in Eastern Ukraine but also involved directly in the war at certain times and when it achieved its first short term goal then began to work on the second step which can be named as medium term. Russia seeks an opportunity to disguise its aggression towards Ukraine and position itself as a mediator in the conflict. This goal can only be achieved if the conflict in Donbas is perceived as an internal problem of Ukraine by the Kiev authorities and the West. The third step, which is the long-term aim, is to gain a special status to Donbas and reintegrate the region to Ukraine as a "trojan horse" in order to influence Ukraine's

political system.

Apparently, the Advisory Council offers Russia a great opportunity to achieve its medium-term goal. In this regard, the most critical question is why Vladimir Zelensky, at least for the time being, approves such format for the negotiations. Of course, it is too early to find out the true reason behind this decision, but it is possible to make some predictions about it. First, resolving the conflict in Donbas was the president's one of the main promises during the presidential election campaign and thereby Zelensky aspires to keep his word. Second, he may be thinking that creating the Advisory Council will eventually exclude Russia and will provide conditions for Ukraine to 'deal with its internal affairs'. Third, taking advantage of Zelensky's political inexperience, Putin tries to convince him that he can achieve peace by making certain concessions.

In fact, creation of the Advisory Council is still an idea which the sides in Minsk reached. There is still time for Zelensky to test the public reaction before creating the format. Although lawmakers, even some of from 'Servant of People' are against direct dialogue with the separatists, it seems the real reaction of public has not come yet. The last meeting in Minsk overlapped with the threat of COVID-19 in Ukraine. In this context, meeting of the advisers of the leaders of the Normandy Format summit planned to be held on March 12 was also postponed due to the threat of the virus. Hence, the reaction of Ukrainians towards the creation of the Advisory Council may be much stronger if the council comes into existence.

Conclusion

Although each conflict has its own dynamics and needs to be addressed within the framework of these dynamics, comparing them with similar cases helps in understanding

the roughness in the conflict. In this context, Moldova and Georgia cases consist excellent experience for Ukrainian authorities. As it is known from these examples, the concessions in the conflicts which are connected to Russia in some way, put the conflicts even an impasse, let alone reaching peace. Although Ukrainian president is eager to resolve the conflict in Donbas as he promised, the peace at any price may not be the best option for the fate of Ukraine as well as for his own reputation. This does not mean that Zelensky should not search peaceful solution for the Donbas Conflict, instead, he should be remembered that before regaining control over the border with Russian Federation in Eastern Ukraine, making concessions on the name peace will hardly be compatible with the interests of Ukraine.