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The Minsk-2 Agreement: What are the Key Threats?

Mykola Vorobiov
Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation Fellow
Johns Hopkins SAIS Center for Transatlantic Relations

Over the last three years Ukraine has experienced unprecedented military, cyber and informational aggression from Kremlin. The various concerns with the Russian threat have sparked a number of debates in different Western communities.

In summer 2014 Ukraine survived the most dramatic days of its recent history. In April 2014, the Kremlin sent a cascade of supplies of weapons, mercenaries and Russian regular army forces to support local separatists in the eastern part of Ukraine. During four months of escalation, Ukraine lost almost 80% of its military equipment; thousands of troops and local civilians were killed.¹

The confrontation reached its peak when three brigades (around 4,000 soldiers) of the Russian army encircled Ukrainian army and volunteer battalions assumed positions in the eastern city of Illovaisk. Despite a promise to provide a “green corridor” to Ukrainian soldiers, Russian forces killed over one thousand of them as they made their way out of Illovaisk. A few weeks after crossing the border, the Russians equipped their positions with heavy artillery and other sophisticated weapons along the so-called safe “green corridor” from Illovaisk.

After the Ukrainians left Illovaisk via this route, the Russians began shelling them. According to those who survived “Putin’s corridor,” the Russian regular army murdered and executed hundreds of wounded Ukrainians mostly officers and volunteers on the battlefield. In exchange for surrendering, the Russians promised some Ukrainian POWs that they would not be handed over to separatist control. But the Russians broke this promise, just as they had broken their promise of safe passage. The captured troops were brutally executed by separatists and Russian mercenaries. Ukrainian members of self-organized volunteer battalions and the other military volunteers were subjected to the worst torture and abuses.



The Illovaïsk tragedy demonstrates the Putin regime's penchant for weaponizing cruelty and exploiting the good faith of nations with which it enters into agreements. On September 5, a few weeks after the Illovaïsk tragedy, the first draft of the "Minsk" agreement was signed by Ukrainian, German, French and Russian representatives. According to its text, a ceasefire would be established, and all sides would withdraw all heavy artillery of at least 122 mm. After that, free and fair elections would be conducted in the occupied territories under Ukrainian and European laws, with the broad participation of international observers.

As in Illovaïsk, the Russians violated the "Minsk" treaty almost immediately. First, the Kremlin did not acknowledge its military presence in eastern Ukraine. It has also continuously supplied local separatists and Russian mercenaries. Although the ceasefire was a crucial component of the Minsk Agreement, fighting in Donbas has continued.

After six months of escalations, the negotiating parties agreed In February 2015 to "Minsk-2", creating a ceasefire in embattled eastern Ukraine.ⁱⁱ During the long hours of negotiations, a new Russia-backed offensive on Debaltseve began, which ended with another encirclement of Ukrainian troops. Having learned from the experience of Illovaïsk, the Ukrainians avoided casualties resulting from faith in Russian promises; most troops were withdrawn before they could be completely encircled.

In Putin's own view, the key railway serving the transportation hub in Debaltseve belonged to the "rebellion republics" of DNR-LNR. This explains the strategic necessity of the Russian offensive while Minsk-2 was being signed.

Russia's consistent disregard for international agreements and commitments expose its unreliability as a partner. In Putin's view, the "Minsk-2" agreement is merely a vehicle to convert both the DNR and LNR "republics," and their 35,000 former and active separatists along with Russian mercenaries into a Transnistria-like, Russia-dependent territory.

The Russian army clearly intends to remain in the eastern part of the country while Ukraine, along with its Western allies, assumes responsibility for rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure in Donbas.

The third and the most alarming issue is that the Ukrainian government must provide amnesty to the separatists, giving them all the rights of every Ukrainian citizen, including to the right to run in local and national elections.

A final weakness of the Minsk agreement is the provision that the "republics" will receive exclusive rights for trans-border cooperation with Russia, and that the Russian language will be accorded a "special status."



One of the main positive arguments in favor of implementing “Minsk” from Western perspectives is that both “republics” will be peacefully returned to Ukraine, all without a single shot fired or another person lost in the Donbas battle zone.

On the other hand, the Kremlin would be pleased if the DNR-LNR republics achieve a “special status,” which means an amnesty for the separatists and their collaborators who fought against the Ukrainian government for the last three years.

Thousands of Ukrainian veterans consider “Minsk-2” a betrayal of national interests. One of the most questionable articles of the agreement for them is amnesty for those militias who committed thousands of war crimes and violated all standards of international military law.

In Putin’s view, “Minsk-2” will not only split Ukrainian elites but also sow disagreement throughout the country, and so can be a useful vehicle to spark an uprising against the current Ukrainian government as tumultuous as the Euromaidan in 2013-2014. That would allow the Kremlin to legitimize its military presence in eastern Ukraine, and enable it to sow greater disunity within Ukraine overall. Putin would be able to show the world that Ukraine and the other countries on Russia’s borders are in Russia’s sphere of influence. To stabilize that sphere, the Kremlin believes that democracy in those countries must be kept weak.

Although “Minsk-2” raises more questions than it answers, a military solution to the conflict in the east is a non-starter. What clauses of the treaty need to be implemented first and in what order after that? What would the reaction be among those citizens who have lived for more than three years under occupation in Donbas? What are their readiness for elections and returning to Ukraine? If Minsk-2 is implemented, how does Ukraine reintegrate or expel thousands of separatists?

As Kurt Volker, U.S. Special Representative to Ukraine, has stressed, over the last three years, time has not played for the Russian side. During this period, the Kremlin has come to understand that it doesn’t want to incorporate Donbas into the Russian Federation, as it did with Crimea in 2014. Meanwhile, full implementation of “Minsk-2” may lead to further escalations inside Ukraine, especially among veterans and politicians who strongly oppose extending amnesty and legitimacy to separatists and Russian collaborators.

All signatories of the “Minsk-2” agreement should fulfill their responsibilities within the treaty. At the same time, more pressure must be applied to the Kremlin, so it lives up to its security commitments in Donbas. Most importantly, Russia must withdraw its forces from Ukraine and then provide access to international organizations to verify Minsk



implementation and the stability of the ceasefire. Future elections in the occupied territories must be prepared.

Once peace, autonomy, and sovereignty return to Ukraine, “Putin’s corridor” cannot be forgotten. The mass grave of hundreds of Ukrainians outside Ilovaisk cautions all Ukrainians to be wary of their neighbor to the east.

ⁱ <http://theduran.com/confirmation-ukrainian-equipment-losses-confirms-scale-ukraines-defeat/>.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ft.com/content/21b8f98e-b2a5-11e4-b234-00144feab7de?mhq5j=e5>.