

# Only decisive western action can prevent eastern Ukraine from becoming another Crimea

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*Buildings have been occupied by groups in several towns and cities in eastern Ukraine, while the Ukrainian government has begun a military operation to try and regain control. **Borja Guijarro Usobiaga** writes on potential diplomatic solutions to the crisis. He argues that any western-backed solution must involve Russia as a partner and be stronger than the response produced by the United States and the European Union to the situation in Crimea. He also notes that if the West cannot take the diplomatic initiative then the situation could escalate extremely quickly.*



After weeks of speculation, the phantom of separatism in Ukraine is back. Heavily armed gunmen have stormed various official buildings in the main cities of the country's east. The striking similarities with the tensions experienced in Crimea in the last month are by no means coincidental. First, unidentified paramilitary troops have occupied several public buildings and proclaimed the independence of the region. At the same time, arms depots are being stormed, weapons are being distributed amongst the rebels and key strategic positions are being brought under control. Presumably, the next step will entail the call for a referendum on independence that will eventually lead parts of eastern Ukraine to join the Russian Federation.

While tensions in eastern Ukraine rise, the rift between the West and Russia is also increasing. The last meeting of the UN Security Council resulted in an exchange of accusations between western powers on the one hand, and Russia on the other. EU foreign ministers met to discuss the new crisis on Monday, while the US is increasing the tone of its discourse and has accused Russia of destabilising Ukraine. In the meantime, Russia has warned the West that it is in its hands to avoid a civil war. In light of this, Ukraine seems yet again condemned to an imminent break-up of its territory.

## What could resolve the crisis?

Somewhat disconcertingly, both the West and the government in Kyiv have again been taken by surprise by the speed of the events, even though analysts have been speculating over the current scenario for weeks. Many in the West are reluctant to pursue a harder line against Russia due to fears of Russian retaliation. This is especially evident in countries like Germany, Hungary, Slovakia and Greece, which are heavily dependent on Russian gas, but not so in Poland or the Baltic states, who have instead opted for a firmer stance vis-à-vis Russia. Moscow is also successfully blackmailing the West, reminding it of its own inconsistencies in Iraq, Kosovo and Libya. The decisions made by the West in the past are thus backfiring in a crucial moment that requires proactive involvement and leadership, not remorse.

However, past mistakes should not stop the West from finding creative solutions to the crisis. In fact, the US and to a larger extent the EU can still contribute to a peaceful outcome, but this will require more than good faith. Most importantly, it will demand a clear roadmap that leads to an immediate de-escalation of the situation in the short term and to the stabilisation of Ukraine in the longer run. And this, in turn, involves pragmatism towards Russia.

Yet de-escalation should not be confused with backing down. Indeed, the West's reluctance to oppose Putin's moves in Crimea has largely contributed to the current crisis. While the US has been keen to impose sanctions on Russian officials and entities, the EU's response has been very mild so far. As could be expected, Monday's EU Foreign Affairs Council only agreed to add new names to the EU's sanctions blacklists. Such a strategy will hardly impose any costs on Russia, which is in any case willing to go further in its destabilisation efforts. The West's division and its symbolic response to Russian expansionism are sending an unmistakable message to Putin, who

is currently putting the West under a new stress test.

De-escalation might only be achieved through a combination of carrots and sticks. Sanctioning Russia without offering it any incentive to solve the current crisis is, simply put, a waste of time. Conversely, buying time for negotiations, while imposing symbolic yet ineffective sanctions such as visa bans and asset freezes, won't do the trick either. In fact, these measures might simply look absurd and obsolete when the foreign ministers of the US, Russia, Ukraine and Catherine Ashton meet this Thursday in Geneva.

The West needs to understand that the stakes are high for Russia and that any coercive act will lead nowhere unless the concerns of Moscow are taken into consideration. Yet at the same time it needs to accept that the only way of negotiating with Putin is by levelling the playing field. This implies two things. First, the US and the EU need to get Russia to the negotiation table and make sure that it is part of the solution, not the problem. Although many would like to leave Russia out of the equation, this is neither possible, nor desirable. At the same time, the West needs to tell Putin that not playing along will have severe economic and political costs for Russia.

Finally, de-escalation will entail a huge diplomatic effort to make sure that Russia takes part and actively supports the Ukrainian elections of 25 May. After all, only a newly elected government can claim the legitimacy that the acting Ukrainian government lacks. Ideally, the elections should be supervised by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – that is, with Russia on board – and give way to a government of national unity to avoid exclusionary politics. In turn, the new government should commit to respecting the rights of Russian and other minorities, promote decentralisation, and grant more autonomy to certain regions. Most importantly, it needs to generate economic growth and political stability. EU financial assistance could be a stepping stone in this direction.

However, 25 May is still some distance away. Until then, the situation could deteriorate quickly and eastern Ukraine could become Crimea 2.0. Whether this will be the case will largely depend on the West's capacity to act swiftly and convincingly to anticipate Putin's moves and take the diplomatic initiative. Unfortunately, time is not on the West's side.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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Angela Merkel and David Cameron, Credit: Number 10 (CC-BY-ND-NC-3.0)

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