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[The Smartest Strategy is to Say Farewell to Donbas](#)



It is useful to look at the conflict in the Donbas from the point of view of Russian interests: While this approach is unpopular in Ukraine, full insight into the interests of the parties involved is the key to building any relationship.

On the one hand, Russia's strategic logic is quite obvious: conflicts in the post-Soviet space help the Kremlin maintain its influence over the states that missed the express train to the European Union and Euro-Atlantic integration. This seems to be Russia's only chance to win a consolation prize in its competition with China, the EU and the United States. Does Russia stand a chance, or will it all just be a sequel of the geopolitical collapse of the USSR, where Russia does not want to lose its grip on the post-Soviet republics, but clings on too tightly? It may also be that Moscow has no coherent long-term strategy towards its neighbors, and gets involved in regional conflicts by inertia, since its decision-makers believe this is the way a great power behaves.

On the other hand, Moscow faces complex difficulties that are worth outlining. The annexation of Crimea has hardly helped Russia strengthen its position and influence in the post-Soviet space. The use of tough measures, not to mention military force, by a larger state poses a threat to its weaker neighbors, which in turn become resistant to any use of soft power. As a result, the annexation of Crimea devalued a number of institutions that used to regulate the complex relations among the former Soviet republics. This is good news

for Russia, as a revisionist state seeking to undermine the world order. However, it's bad news for a Russia that is trying to consolidate its regional influence. Russian policymakers will have to face farther-reaching and more dangerous consequences than the post-Crimea sanctions. In any case, statist decision-making bodies in post-Soviet states increasingly tend to perceive the Kremlin as a potential source of danger, despite their traditional pro-Russian sentiments. This, in turn, opens a broad window of opportunity for both regional and global players. Russia's regional influence is waning: either the disintegration tendencies are too strong, or the wrong leverage for consolidation has been chosen. It seems that not only the Ukrainian national elites but also stakeholders in other neighboring states will find it increasingly appealing to oppose the Kremlin instead of cooperating with it.

In light of this, it is hardly possible to say that the developments in the Donbas serve Russia's long-term interests. It's time to make the difficult decision to leave.

First and foremost, the risks outweigh the benefits. The financial cost is relatively small: Russia's presence in the Donbas is estimated at around \$3 billion-6 billion per year. By comparison, according to average estimates, the annual cost of the Soviet war in Afghanistan reached about \$15 billion in today's prices. Russia seems to be able to afford such a protracted, frozen conflict from an economic point of view. However, any escalation or unpredictable developments will immediately pose a threat to the Kremlin. Whether black swans or white swans, both bring bad news. In fact, the Kremlin is trying hard to reduce the conflict's cost in terms of reputation, influence and prospects, let alone money.

Secondly, Russia's presence in the Donbas has already fulfilled several functions, primarily slowing down Ukraine's attempts to move closer to NATO, as well as triggering additional domestic risks and challenges in Ukraine. The case of Ukraine indicates that Russia can block post-Soviet countries' accession to Western structures, to a certain extent. To be more precise, the military presence in the Donbas has made Ukrainian NATO membership very unlikely. Many people, both in Ukraine and Russia, believe that this is due to the existence of disputed territories and domestic hostilities. But actually the insurmountable barrier to NATO membership is something else. The key to membership is in the hands of the member states, whose political decisions are driven by the desire to preserve the alliance's unity and stability in order to ensure collective security. This unity could be threatened by the need to conduct a full-fledged war against Russia, which could be prompted by the Kremlin's decisions and deeds. Such a step would not be easy for many NATO member states, and they do not want to increase the probability of being forced to take it by agreeing to Ukrainian membership. This is the logic behind the medium-term prospects of Ukraine's cooperation with NATO.

This is not precisely good news for Ukraine; NATO membership would have been the best option. Conducting security policy in the gray zone of Eastern Europe is a very complex and expensive task, full of risks. Unfortunately, the state of the world order does not favor Ukraine, and the Ukrainians are paying a disproportionately high price for this. Therefore, Russia's continued presence in the Donbas no longer creates additional problems for Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO, since the current problems suffice. Some issues could be removed from the agenda if relations between Russia and NATO were aggravated. This could prompt changes in decision-making within the alliance as regards Ukraine. Therefore, the Kremlin should observe and try to balance the degree of tensions in its relations with the West. Withdrawal from the Donbas is one way of doing so.

It seems that the level of domestic problems in Ukraine has peaked. The protracted military conflict has resulted in tensions within Ukrainian society, a huge problem with reintegration and a split in Ukrainian identity. Still, pretentious as it may sound, the process of nation-building in Ukraine is unfolding in parallel. Russia also plays a role here. The longer Russia stays in the Donbas, the more the new Ukrainian identity will be built on denial of Russian identity. Starting with symbols, such as the names of streets and monuments, this process will gradually spill over to more fundamental building blocks, primarily language. It is only logical to conclude that this is to the detriment of Russia in the long run. Although it is impossible to turn back the clock, the degree of hostility can vary, as can its manifestations and historical impact. Franco-German reconciliation scenarios are impossible in the foreseeable future, for a number of reasons. The key to the re-establishment of bilateral relations lies in the Donbas.

Russia has failed to implement its most ambitious plan: to take Ukraine under control and legitimize the annexation of Crimea, using the Donbas as leverage. It has succeeded in weakening Ukraine and creating

external conditions for the preservation of things Ukraine had hoped to get rid of. The risk of a NATO base in Sevastopol has been reduced to a minimum, albeit at a heavy cost. Nor will a base appear in Odessa. Still, the art of politics is about telling the difference between attainable and unattainable goals. Russia is paying dearly for its choices as regards Ukraine, while it can hardly count on the fulfillment of all of its wishes. A presence in the Donbas is no longer effective leverage in the hands of the Kremlin. With time, it will turn into an increasingly painful trap. Stuck in a strategically futile conflict, Russia will be losing momentum in its dialogue with other key players. Thus, something which seemed to be Russia's leverage only yesterday may backfire tomorrow.

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