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[Ukraine-Russia: small steps to break the impasse?](#)



Relations between Ukraine and Russia have reached a strategic impasse. The main issues – the conflict in the Donbas and the status of Crimea – have become unsolvable for the foreseeable future; the degree of mutual dependence has decreased, and distrust has grown dramatically.

Under these circumstances, it is difficult to see anything but hostility and confrontation. Time is working against both countries: The world is quickly moving forward, while their resources and potential are blocked. At stake for Russia is the loss of its status as a regional superpower; Ukraine faces ongoing risks to its statehood.

It all brings to mind “the prisoner’s dilemma”. Two suspects are interrogated. If one confesses to a crime while the other doesn’t, the former is released but the latter receives the maximum sentence. If both of them testify against each other, they both get a minimum sentence. If they both refuse to confess, they get a minimum sentence under a different article of the criminal code. Placed in different prison cells and deprived of any possibility to communicate with each other, the suspects often choose the safest line of conduct, which guarantees them the minimum loss regardless of the other player’s conduct. However, the safest choice is not the most beneficial for the parties when the game is repeated several times. Both of them could achieve much more in the long run if there is greater trust between the two prisoners.

The game illustrates the difficulty of establishing long-term contacts between states as well as indicating how mutual trust can increase gains for both parties exponentially. It is precisely trust, or rather the lack of it, that is the key to the future of Russian-Ukrainian bilateral relations.

Kyiv has serious grounds for suspicion. The Kremlin's decision to occupy Crimea violated a long list of norms and principles of international law, as well as a number of bi- and multilateral documents signed by Ukraine and Russia. In such a situation, no responsible statesperson has any right to create illusions or hope for the best outcome. The tough rules of realpolitik espoused by Russia itself require just the opposite: distrust, suspicion and readiness for the worst-case scenario. Ukraine is going to build its policy following this very principle, and no document signed by Russia could become a convincing guarantee of security for the foreseeable future.

The mutual perception of the situation as a zero-sum game is a natural consequence of the deficit of trust. Hence the parties make no major concessions, since the slightest victory by one side is perceived as a failure for the other. In the case of protracted conflicts, the tactic of small steps becomes the best way to at least partially restore confidence. The ability to understand the hierarchy of the other party's interests becomes crucial in order to exchange secondary interests for primary ones. These small steps and sacrifices of secondary interests serve as a contribution to mutual benefit, and function as a manifestation of intent. Under the current circumstances, signatures on documents are hardly able to convince anyone, but concrete, practical steps can. Small steps towards each other, which can partially restore trust as a basis for even the smallest dialogue, can primarily focus on the humanitarian, environmental and social spheres – the most important areas from the point of view of post-conflict settlement, which serve as relatively simple and uncontroversial initiatives against the backdrop of political confrontation. Hostage exchanges, steps to restore infrastructure, mutual contributions to overcoming the environmental consequences of hostilities: such initiatives can go beyond the logic of a zero-sum game and facilitate solutions of more complex problems in the long run, especially when we speak of amnesties and Ukraine regaining control over its borders.

Three main scenarios for the development of relations between the two countries can be outlined against the backdrop of this dramatic lack of trust. As usually happens in politics, the most likely scenario is the one which requires minimum effort and ensures persistence of the existing *status quo*. Let's call this a *pessimistic scenario*, which means the worst possible outcome for the dynamics of bilateral relations if not Ukraine or Russia individually. A complete lack of trust will be its distinctive feature. In this case, Russia will still be perceived as the main threat to security, and long-term strategy will aim at deterring Russia by all available means. The current imbalance of forces, and the ephemerality of Ukraine's chances of joining NATO and/or the EU, will hardly provide great comfort to Russia, since Ukraine is going to take advantage of any chance that it comes across in the future. Confrontation with Ukraine will largely undermine Moscow's position in the post-Soviet space, and will narrow the opportunities for any geopolitical maneuvers. At the moment, Russia can unilaterally reverse this trend by the use of military force, where costs and risks are high and incalculable.

Partial restoration of trust between the two countries can hardly eliminate Ukraine's concerns for its own security and its striving for NATO membership as the most reliable way of achieving it. However, this scenario would allow Russia to partially restore its regional standing, and focus on important integration projects that are already under way. A step which could help achieve this goal would be maximization of efforts aimed at the return of the entire territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts to Ukrainian jurisdiction. There are multiple opportunities for achieving mutual positive results, starting with hostage exchange, through the establishment of proper conditions in Russia itself for admitting adherents of the *Russkiy mir* ("pan-Russian world") who prefer to leave Ukraine. The main condition is the ability of Kyiv and Moscow to see a common problem whose solution will be beneficial for both parties. Naturally, developments in the Donbas are part of a geopolitical confrontation, and if we say Donetsk and Luhansk are the key to solving the problem, the impasse cannot be overcome. However, if the Kremlin chooses a larger chessboard, it will not be too difficult to shift the focus to realize that prolonging the meaningless confrontation on Ukraine's territory drastically reduces the Kremlin's chances of winning all other bilateral games. At the same time, the prospects of lifting some of the sanctions and freeing up resources should look increasingly appealing to the Kremlin.

Rapid cessation of what is often called a "hybrid war" in the east of Ukraine, and especially Russia's active involvement in overcoming negative consequences of the war, could open a window of opportunity for pragmatic co-existence of the two states, which may be able to work together in individual spheres of mutual

interest.

It is impossible to speak of the full restoration of trust without the resolution of the Crimean problem. The *optimistic scenario* is so distant from the sphere of the intersection of mutual interests of the parties that it is difficult to discuss. It is doubtful whether even a complete restoration of the territorial integrity of Ukraine will be enough to restore full mutual trust in bilateral relations. Besides, there is no tangible model of such relations today, since the most friendly and truly warm bilateral relations were witnessed when the world order was entirely different.

As has already been said, it is extremely difficult to break the impasse in Russian-Ukrainian relations. Many believe that it cannot be achieved today. This would be regarded as advanced problem solving in mathematics textbooks. The easiest way is to leave the problem on the shelf and focus on easier tasks. However, unlike mathematics textbooks, the problem cannot rest on the shelf forever. Tricky as it may seem, better relations is in the interest of both countries.

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