

Russia and the West: no deal?

COMPLETING A BROKEN JIGSAW PUZZLE



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Bartosz Duda

Graduated from the Cracow University of Economics, École Supérieure de Commerce de Montpellier and the University of Warsaw. Scholar at the Saint Petersburg State University. Areas of interest: European affairs, Common Foreign and Security Policy, Polish Foreign Policy, diplomacy. Currently working at Warsaw Office of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

The fragile political architecture of the Middle East was broken to pieces by Western reckless foreign policy. In the meantime the Russian internal crisis, the lack of confidence and the anachronistic legacy of the fallen empire led to aggression towards Ukraine. Given the fact there is no simple answer to solve these crises, one fact is certain: there will be no deal without Russia, even though it has completely different interests than the West. Furthermore, any vision of the future stability in Middle East will need the endorsement of other regional powers like: Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

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The conflicts in Ukraine and Syria have recently overtaken minds of the most policy makers. The first provoked Europe and US to distance from Russia but its military intervention in Syria caused hesitations. However, the West should not come back to *business as usual*. In fact, the genuine transatlantic "no" to such policy towards Russia is the one and only approach that would succeed and achieve the desired result. Nonetheless, the problem lies with the chosen strategy and the measures taken in order to fulfil it. The tricky part is that our transatlantic community does not have one in regard to Russia.

Strategy towards Russia

The current *no business as usual* approach should not base only on the reactive containment. The fact is that, **in a long run, the lasting isolation of Russia will be difficult to maintain and, more importantly, will be undesirable.** The West needs to overcome several obstacles and challenges that have raised within the EU and between both sides of the Atlantic. It is indispensable in order to reach the goals aiming at providing effective action plan in response to Russia's activity in recent years.

The aforementioned challenges and conditions that have to be fulfilled for the sake of the successful long-term *no business as usual* policy are as follow:

1] Preservation of the unity and solidarity within EU towards Russia. Saying that the EU's unity is the condition *sine qua non* for its operative external policy is one of the most favourite *cliché* in Europe. One would say then it is not worthy to keep mentioning that. Although, it is. The gravity of the present situation calls for the need of European solidarity. Therefore, the stiff position of all member states towards Russian aggression in Ukraine and the unanimity in terms of the necessity of sanctions has to be appreciated.

2] Renewal of the transatlantic alliance with regard to growing divergence between allies. The divergence of interests between the partners has become the habit instead of being incidental. It is the weakening US commitment in European security, that is the main source of discords. It does not only relates to American presence in the EU, but to its influence in Wider Europe and

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MENA region as well. Hence, the importance of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Plan is nowadays greater than ever. The successful result of negotiations could be a kick-starter for the renewal of the alliance and a significant message to the rest of the world, proving that the report of the end of Western world was an exaggeration.

3] Effective management of international crises in Syria and Ukraine.

These conflicts are currently the most pressing problems for the transatlantic relations with Russia. Moreover, both are inextricably linked. The fate of Ukraine will affect Syria and *vice versa*. Most importantly, they are at the same time the biggest challenges for the European unity and the durability of the transatlantic alliance.

No more partnership

The eastern crisis put to an end the "strategic partnership" with Russia. **Despite the fact, that Europe succeeded in posing unanimously sanctions against Kremlin, the united front cannot be taken for granted in the future.** One of the main threat for the unity is the influx of refugees

which is the consequence of the war in Syria and recently the French hunger for revenge after the terrorist attacks in Paris. Lack of the solidarity from some European countries in this matter calls into question the further unity in terms of sanctions. Hence, Europe cannot try to solve these issues separately from each other. In the meantime, the general attitude of the US towards the crises in Middle East causes serious frictions with their European partners. Washington, being also liable for this chaos is not very keen to burden the generated costs, just to mention modest help regarding to the refugee influx.

Unfortunately, the Russian bomber shot down by Turkish fighting falcon makes the whole issue more blurred and complicated. One has to keep in mind it was in fact the NATO that brought down the Russian warfare machine. It questions the Western capabilities to form the much needed coalition against ISIS. At the same time, Russia will not manage to overcome its international isolation if Turkey will not be involved in the whole process. Therefore, Putin's desire to come back from the isolation could undermine the consequences of the Russian-Turkish tension. It does not mean, however, there will be no repercussions. Kremlin perceives this incident as an

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insult and a humiliation. As a form of revenge, it can start to support indirectly Kurds in their fight against Turkish army and try to discredit Ankara on international level as a not viable partner.

Finally, **nobody really knows what part Russia prescribed for Ukraine and Bashar al Assad's regime** in this jigsaw puzzle and how Kremlin will combine these two fronts together in order to achieve its goals.

What can be done

The implementation of Minsk Agreement is unlikely to be finalised. Consequently, the new form of the settlement will be needed. **The Normand format should be replaced e.g. by the Geneva format. The presence of the US in the negotiations would be an important factor strengthening Ukraine.** The problem are the presidential elections next year, so it is unclear if Barack Obama would really like to get involved in resolving Russian-Ukrainian conflict. On the other hand, efforts in order to stabilise the situation for any price before the end of his term of office could bring devastating consequences for Kiev. Thus, only after the upcoming US presidential elections the real progress is possible.

The end of the war in Syria should be the greatest priority for all of the sides even if that would be a means of keeping President Assad in power. However, it would be totally unacceptable for Turkey. Neither the transatlantic community is eager to let it happen, although the West is getting more flexible on this issue. One has to be aware of contradictory interests of particular actors. The West wants to contain ISIS and remove Assad, therefore it supports Syrian opposition, including the Kurds who are very efficient in the fight against ISIS. Russia backs the current regime, fighting the opposition. Turkey would also like to depose the Syrian president but at the same time it is ambiguous towards ISIS, due to its actions in order to defeat Kurds. Iran's major interest is to maintain internal stability, hence it would like to keep Assad in power. Consequently, Saudi Arabia which is always trying to counter the Iranian influence supports the Sunni opposition. In this regard, **the Bosnia and Herzegovina scenario should be considered as the best possible option for any positive changes in the country.**

Another Dayton?

On the 20th anniversary of the controversial Dayton agreement, the document should

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serve as a starting point during the Syria peace talks in Vienna. In order to reach any consensus the country will have to be decentralised where three separated regions with Alawites, Sunnis and Kurds will establish a form of confederation.

However the Dayton scenario directly implement in Syria will not be a sustainable solution considering its effects in BiH after 20 years. For the mid-term perspective the best option could be if these three "cantons" will become *de facto* some sort of **protectorates of Iran and Russia (Alawites), Gulf countries (Sunnis) and the West (Kurds)**. Despite doubts and limitations, **the initial deal has to be treated as a part of transition process, given the fact it is always better to continue it at the table than on the field.**

Europeans should press their American ally in order to receive more substantial support in the Middle East crisis. That would be crucial in case of any negotiations with Russia. The presence of the whole EU in solving both conflicts will be desirable. As the European Council on Foreign Relations suggests¹, **Federica Mogherini should be**

¹ S. Dennison, N. Witney, *Europe's neighbourhood: Crisis as the new normal*, ECFR, June

supported by two Commissioners, responsible for the Southern and the Eastern neighbourhood. These two would be directly responsible for managing both of the conflicts actively backed up by a group of member states that are the most interested in the meaningful peace process e.g. France, Greece, Italy and Spain for Syria and Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia for Ukraine.

Set of locks

The current reality requires from the West to **seek the mutual accord with Russia where it is necessary, without trading any arrangements for substantial concessions in other important aspects.** Therefore, the policy of differentiation and the close transatlantic cooperation with greater European initiative and activity, especially in terms of hard security within NATO, is much needed.

Unfortunately, Turkey as the member of the alliance becomes its *enfant terrible* and it seems to be difficult to rely on President Erdoğan. Meanwhile, it would be extremely

2015; S. Dennison, F. Godement, R. Gowan, D. Levy, K. Liik, J. Shapiro, N. Witney, *The Road back to European power*, ECFR, July 2015.

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difficult or even unattainable as argues Gerald Knaus (founder and director of European Stability Initiative) to manage the migration crisis without Ankara². In the whole picture one cannot omit Iran, since it is an important figure in the region as well as a potential partner after the nuclear agreement in July. Consequently, any Iranian action will meet the reaction of Saudi Arabia.

To sum up, if Russia is the most important lock to stabilise the situation in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, there are other different regional locks on the way. At the same time, being aware there will be no keys to open all of them, there is a need for a set of picklocks.

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² Gerald Knaus, *Merkel Plan – restoring control; retaining compassion*, ESI, October 2015.

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CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ul. Mińska 25, 03-808 Warszawa t: +48 22 646 52 67

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