








New Europe Center  
Kyiv, Ukraine

# New Europe Wonders:

## POLICY COMMENTARY

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## WHAT SHOULD THE FUTURE STRATEGY OF THE WEST REGARDING THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE BE?

Five years ago Russian aggression in Ukraine started, first with the occupation of the Crimea and then with the hostilities in the East. Despite numerous attempts of Ukraine and its Western partners to restore Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Russia has not demonstrated the will to stop the conflict, with the death toll reaching 13 000 now. Over five years of war we are asking ourselves : what did these years bring in terms of successes and failures? The New Europe Center collected the opinions of the renowned foreign researchers about the following questions:

- What are the key achievements of the West in supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression?
- What are the key shortcomings of the Western policy?
- In your opinion, what should the future strategy of the West regarding the Russian aggression against Ukraine be?



**MATHIEU BOULEGUE,**

Research Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme, The Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House):

Since the Revolution of Dignity and the start of Russian aggression, I believe the West has been instrumental in helping Ukraine strengthen its reforms potential and its irrevocable (albeit slow) path towards Euro-Atlantic structures. This is best exemplified with the liberalisation of visas with the European Union or through continued assistance in Security Sector Reform, which makes Ukraine more resilient against Russia's negative influence. Much has also been done to help increase civil society resilience and support Ukraine's democratic identity.

Shortcomings in Western engagement remain, however, and notably the lack of consistency over policy options towards Ukraine. 'Ukraine fatigue' is dangerously brewing in Brussels, Washington D.C. and amongst European countries. Partly because of pressing policy issues, partly because of the perception that Kyiv does not deliver enough regarding reforms. Furthermore, the Minsk 2 agreements are in danger of being declared brain dead, for lack of renewed impetus and clearly-identified ways forward. Russian and Ukrainian positions are irreconcilable, and few options remain on the table. However hard the West can try to push for a compromise, it is up to Kyiv and Moscow to sort things out. Lest a 'grand bargain' is designed between Presidents Trump and Putin, which would have dire consequences for Ukraine.

Unfortunately, time will play to Ukraine's disadvantage. As years pass, Western public memory will erode about the nature of Russian aggression. So will the willingness to increase support for Ukraine. Western and international partners need to renew their commitment towards Ukraine and their support of the country's territorial integrity not only in occupied Donbas, but also in Crimea and in the Sea of Azov. Pressure also needs to remain on Russia: pledging for continued and united sanctions in the West would be a way forward. This is particularly relevant this year in the context of the presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine, and likely Russian interference in the process.



**STEVEN PIFER,**

William J Perry fellow at Stanford University, nonresident fellow with the Brookings Institution, Ambassador of the USA to Ukraine (1998-2000):

The West needs to understand that the Russia-Ukraine conflict is not just about Russia and Ukraine. It also concerns the kind of neighbor that Europe and the West have in Russia.

The United States and Europe have succeeded in maintaining a joint policy supporting Ukraine, its independence and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's military seizure of Crimea and its aggression in the Donbas. The West has maintained visa, financial and other sanctions on Russia for nearly five years, something that few analysts would have predicted in 2014. While Russian officials try to dismiss the sanctions' effect, economists estimate their impact at about one percent of the country's gross domestic product, no small amount for the stagnant Russia economy.

The primary shortcoming of Western policy has been its failure to take additional measures when Russian actions called for them. Last November, the Russian military attacked and seized three Ukrainian naval vessels engaged in innocent passage and imprisoned their crews. This is part of Moscow's effort to assert unilateral control over the Sea of Azov and increase economic pressure on Kyiv. The lack of any significant Western reaction undoubtedly has emboldened the Kremlin to continue such salami tactics against Ukraine.

The United States and Europe should continue their political support for Kyiv. They should maintain—and toughen—sanctions to affect the cost/benefit calculations in the Kremlin and hopefully persuade the Russian leadership to adopt a change in course. At the same time, the West should keep communication lines open to Moscow to facilitate a settlement in the Donbas, making clear that, if Russia and Ukraine resolve that conflict, Donbas-related sanctions will be removed. (Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea poses a longer-term question, and Crimea-related sanctions should remain in place.)



**SUSAN STEWART,**

Senior Associate, German Institute for International  
and Security Affairs:

As it is becoming more and more difficult to talk about „the West“ because of the increasing split between the US and some EU member states since Donald Trump was elected president, I will confine my remarks to the case of the EU.

The key achievements of the EU in supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression include upholding the sanctions against Russia over the past five years, providing significant support to Ukraine for a wide variety of reforms, and (through the « Minsk process ») helping to prevent Russia from going even further in its support of the separatists in the Donbas and its military intervention in Ukraine. Also important is that the tone of the debate in the EU and the assumptions about Russia's goals have changed and become more realistic.

One key shortcoming is that because of the massive problems currently facing the EU (Brexit, migration issues, illiberal democracies, etc), there are not sufficient resources (not just financial, but also intellectual and strategic) available to produce a medium- to long-term approach to the post-Soviet region. Another major problem is that the EU remains a very weak foreign policy actor due to its combination of supranational and intergovernmental elements and the requirement of unanimity on foreign policy decisions.

The future strategy of the EU regarding the Russian aggression towards Ukraine should be embedded in a broader strategy concerning the post-Soviet space, or at least Russia and the Eastern Partnership countries. It should be based on the awareness that Russian goals concerning these countries run counter to those of the EU. It should also be premised on the assumption that the Eastern Partnership states are sovereign actors with the right to decide about their domestic and foreign policy. This implies that the ruling elites in these countries are responsible for their decisions and should be held accountable for them.



**FLORENT PARMENTIER,**

Head of Policy Lab, Sciences Po, Associate Fellow, HEC Paris  
Center for Geopolitics (France):

De-escalation is the main result achieved. Europeans and the USA have managed to show a united front in terms of economic sanctions against the Russian leadership. It was not an easy task for Europeans to stay united as some of them feel the sanctions as being detrimental to their economic interests – notably in the agro-industries.

The Europeans have been able to back the Normandy process – which has been a way to de-escalate the conflict, without solving it; we don't know how it would have evolved with President Trump should the US be involved from the beginning. Even in case of very conflictual relations, there is a need for spaces of negotiation and cooperation to prepare the future.

Key shortcomings of the Western policy are a lack of anticipation and success in the state-building process. The Europeans and the Americans have together missed the opportunity to anticipate the crisis of the Azov Sea. An extension of the OSCE mission might have preventively helped to ease the on-going tension in the region. This crisis is a direct threat to the stability in the East, notably the city of Mariupol.

Also, the Americans and the Europeans have elaborated different programmes of state-building, trying to strengthen the rule of law and put into place a specific model, inspired from the

US style of business relations, the British National Health System or the French experience of the decentralization process. It remains to be seen in the forthcoming elections if the current results of these programmes match with the expectations of Ukrainian citizens – still angry at corruption.

On the future strategy of the West regarding the Russian aggression against Ukraine: the set of policies that have been implemented by the Americans and the Europeans have a key objective: making it costlier for Russia to alter the status quo and go for an escalation of tensions in the East. The Minsk process has been set up to de-escalate the conflict, not to make peace.

Should the Europeans add sanctions to the already existing ones? They have not proved to be totally efficient so far, as Russian public opinion can accept this kind of sacrifices. Should we put more weapons to act on the ground to deter any Russian attack? It might be useful to get Russian satisfied with the status quo, but it won't ease tensions nor help to set up a peace settlement. Ukraine will hardly regain its territorial integrity through war. As a wait-and-see policy for a de-escalation process has limited perspectives of success, bringing a UN mission is Ukraine might get the agreement of all the major actors in the conflict.



**DANIEL SZELIGOWSKI,**

Senior Research Fellow, Polish Institute of International Affairs  
(PISM) :

Many Ukrainian officials and experts tend to criticize the West for not doing enough to help Ukraine fight the Russian aggression, and they are often right. The years-long refusal to sell lethal weapon to Ukraine had not been well grounded. The false moral equivalency, manifesting itself through numerous appeals to Ukrainian authorities to deescalate (sic!) and compromise with the invader, has been lamentable. And paying lip-service to building Ukraine's resilience while effectively working to its disadvantage, as it has been the case with Nord Stream II, which is an extremely anti-Ukrainian project, does not even deserve a comment.

Still, no one should fool themselves: the Western leaders do not follow Yeltsin's advice and they do not start their day with thinking what they did for Ukraine. Many of them would not subscribe to the "club of friends of Ukraine". Therefore, the fact that economic sanctions on Russia have been in place for a fifth year is probably the biggest, yet frequently underestimated success. Of course, one may deliberate why they were introduced only after the MH17 flight had been downed, not sooner. But that misses the point that the sanctions caught Kremlin off guard and were imperative to prevent Russian troops in Donbas from further adventurism.

The western approach should be two-track. On the one hand, political and economic pressure

on Russia needs to be kept as long as there are Russian troops in Ukraine and the territorial integrity of the country is not restored. Key will be unity among the Western community to fill the gaps in the sanctions regime. On the other hand, support for Ukraine needs to be maintained in order to help build strong and democratic state institutions, including the Armed Forces and the Security Service. These are obviously complementary, not substitute, policies, yet many in the West do not want them to go side by side. Ukraine should refrain from providing arguments in favor of any trade-offs between those two.