

The Kremlin Speeding Down Highway to Hell

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Moscow is speeding past the first off-ramp in the Crimea crisis. It is important to slow down a bit to look for the last exit from this highway to hell.

The Kremlin hoped that by seizing Crimea, stoking instability in Ukraine's southeast and demonizing the new government in Kiev, it could corral the West into a deal with Russia on a new political framework for Ukraine.

This could be a Dayton-style accord that would have imposed a Bosnia-type cantonization of Ukraine through a new constitution. Euphemistically called "federalization," this would have been a loose confederation in which the southeastern regions would forever remain in Russia's orbit. Russian would be a second state language of a militarily neutral Ukraine.

It was an incredibly arrogant agenda to re-establish the Ukrainian state from scratch. Not surprisingly, the West balked. Federalization will not fly after the Crimea vote.

On Friday in London, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pushed U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to help delay the presidential election in Ukraine, planned for May 25. Lavrov also sought commitments from Kiev not to seek membership in NATO and not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union.

Russia needs time to regroup its allies in Ukraine and wants to push the presidential election to December, as the Feb. 21 agreement originally stipulated. Russia and some political players in Ukraine are interested in early parliamentary elections. The EU has doubts about the rush to sign the agreement's political chapters. A delay until the new president is in place in Kiev looks reasonable.

Moscow has opened a backdoor channel with Yulia Tymoshenko's party, Fatherland, to explore prospects for a broad governing coalition that would ditch radical nationalists and incorporate political elites from the southeastern regions dominated by Russian-speakers. A bill to reschedule the presidential vote to Dec. 7 has been introduced, and a new constitution is in the works.

If Fatherland were to form a coalition with Party of Regions, Russia would likely de-escalate militarily, and separatist provocations in the East would fall. It is a long shot but more feasible than a new Dayton.

As for Crimea, Moscow's only option now to avoid a new Cold War and Western sanctions is to purchase or lease the peninsula from Ukraine for good money. It is the last exit before hell.

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