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How to Prevent Ukraine's Tinderbox From Exploding

By Igor Ivanov

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Less than a week after the signing of the Geneva agreement on Ukraine, all of the initial optimism has given way to doubt, skepticism and pessimism. More and more politicians and observers now have a hard time believing that the "spirit of Geneva" can be maintained at all. In fact, some even say the Geneva meeting did more harm than good by raising false hopes that Russia and the West can overcome fundamental differences on Ukraine and by creating the illusion that all sides could reach consensus on a way out of the crisis.

I cannot agree with that point of view. The meeting in Geneva on April 17 was definitely needed. At the very least, the participants sat at the same table together and looked each other in the eye. Yet, the skeptics also have a point: The joint statement on the results of the meeting showed that none of the parties is prepared to assume full responsibility for resolving the problems at the very heart of the Ukrainian crisis. They also failed to demonstrate a readiness to carry out specific joint actions, in the absence of which they cannot possibly offer effective assistance to Ukraine.

Russia has publicly stated its position and now shows little or no interest in providing large-scale aid to Ukraine. That is understandable, considering that no matter what Moscow might do and no matter how good its intentions, the hysterical media campaign unleashed in Ukraine and the West attributes every mortal sin to Russia and blames it for every problem, real or imagined.

Leading European states have decided to take a wait-and-see approach, despite the fact that the Ukrainian crisis dominates headlines there. This includes Germany, France and Poland, whose foreign ministers signed the agreement in Kiev on Feb. 21 and who therefore have a direct responsibility to carry it out. Britain has also effectively withdrawn from any real participation in settling the crisis, agreeing to send European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton to the Geneva meeting even though she is not authorized to make independent decisions. In the same spirit, the EU assigned European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso to discuss the issue of Ukraine's gas debt with Russia, knowing full well that he has always taken the most uncompromising stance on cooperation with Russia in the energy field. The EU has made no further promises of economic or financial aid, even though Brussels is well aware that Ukraine needs immediate assistance to avoid bankruptcy.

For Washington, Ukraine is just a pawn in its larger geopolitical game. The U.S. has no intention of offering serious assistance to Ukraine or of assuming any significant economic costs on its behalf. Washington talks a lot about the $1 billion in mostly long-term loan guarantees it has promised Kiev, knowing at the same time that it will do little to pull Ukraine out of its current economic crisis.

The important thing for the U.S. is not Ukraine but how the U.S. can use this crisis to promote its own interests. At this stage, it has three main goals. First, the U.S. strives to contain Russia and prevent it from strengthening its international position. Second, it wants to breathe new life into NATO at a time when the alliance has lost a clear vision of its function and to simultaneously force Europeans to cough up money for its military needs. Third, the U.S. is looking to strengthen its position in global energy markets.

Under such conditions, it should hardly surprise anyone that amid all the talk of "solidarity with the Ukrainian people," the positive momentum that began with the signing of the Geneva agreement has quickly fizzled out. Once again, we are drawn into a fruitless debate over how to interpret individual phrases in that much beleaguered one-page document.

Unfortunately, it is obvious that Ukraine is now a tinderbox ready to explode, and the consequences will be serious for everyone. It would be a fatal mistake not to continue the work started last week in Geneva as soon as possible. Despite its brevity and ambiguity, the Geneva agreement remains the only foundation on which to base international cooperative efforts at overcoming the crisis in Ukraine. In continuing that work, participants should take the following factors into account.

First, the most urgent task is to end the violence and ease tensions. The responsible forces in Ukraine and all the international players who sincerely want to contribute to resolving the crisis should focus their greatest efforts on achieving this goal.

Second, despite the many disagreements on political issues, all sides share a common understanding of the seriousness of the social and economic crisis Ukraine is facing. Every

analyst — be it in the West or the East — recognizes the threat of Ukraine suffering a severe economic and financial collapse. That is why Russia, the EU and the U.S. should immediately develop economic measures to avert that disaster. Without taking that urgent step, any talk of constitutional or political reforms will be meaningless.

Third, the participants in the Geneva talks should quickly reach an agreement on how to provide for democratic, transparent and fair elections in Ukraine — both presidential and parliamentary. The worst thing that can happen is if elections are held but a significant part of Ukrainian society and global partners do not recognize their legitimacy. The timing of the elections is important, of course, but it is even more important to create the necessary conditions in which they can be carried out. This includes the scrupulous implementation of the relevant procedures and the presence of international observers. Ukraine's international partners should play an active role in ensuring the legitimacy of the upcoming elections.

Finally, all of the interested parties should focus not on achieving tactical advantages but on assisting Ukraine to rid itself of the turmoil it has found itself mired in. When U.S. President Barack Obama publicly expressed doubt that the Geneva agreement would be implemented only hours after it was signed, he either purposely or unwittingly sided with those who do not want a resolution to the crisis and who are working for a further escalation of tensions in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian crisis is a serious test for the international community, but as former U.S. President John F. Kennedy said a half century ago: "Our problems are man-made; therefore, they can be solved by man."

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