

Ukraine's Tragedy Unfolding in Several Acts

By [Joschka Fischer](#)

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Grand political strategy and everyday experience often have a lot in common. Try, for example, to swallow a salami whole, and you will probably choke to death. In the world of high politics, people behave no differently: they slice their salami before consuming it. If they cannot achieve an objective immediately, they approach it patiently, step by step.

Today, the Kremlin is employing such "salami tactics" vis-a-vis Ukraine. Before our eyes, a tragedy, in which the players and their aims are clear, is unfolding in several acts. What is not known is how many more acts this sad political spectacle will have, and thus when — and how — it will end.

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European actions will.

The first act began in the fall of 2013, when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich duped the European Union and its leaders by refusing to sign a long-planned association agreement. Instead, he chose to have Ukraine enter a customs union with Russia, in exchange for a pile of cash and cheap oil and natural gas. President Vladimir Putin seemed to have achieved his political aim, namely to bring Ukraine, which had been drifting toward Europe throughout the post-Soviet period, firmly back into the Kremlin's sphere of influence.

The second act was staged by the Ukrainian people, who, in the west of the country and on Maidan Square in Kiev, rebelled against Yanukovich's effort to align their country more closely with Russia. After three months of protests, the uprising led to Yanukovich's ouster, temporarily derailing Putin's plan to vassalize Ukraine peacefully. It was not NATO, the EU, or the U.S. that acted to block Ukraine's shift eastwards. Yanukovich was chased from power by a significant majority of Ukrainians themselves.

The third act was born of President Vladimir Putin's domestic political situation, and resulted in a stopgap solution that led to Russia's poorly disguised armed invasion, and then annexation, of Crimea. Without Crimea's annexation, Putin faced domestic political disaster and a premature end to his dream of reenacting Ivan the Great's "gathering of the Russian lands" and restoring Russia's global power.

But Putin's aim has never been Russian control only of Crimea; he has always wanted all of Ukraine, because he fears nothing more than a successful, democratic, modern neighbor that undermines by example the authority of his own "managed democracy." So now we have reached the tragedy's fourth act, in which Russia attempts to grab eastern Ukraine, and the West responds.

Annexing eastern Ukraine — and thus splitting the country in two — by force has much less support than the operation in Crimea, even among Russian speakers. The aim of Russia's covert military intervention there is to destabilize Ukraine in the long term by using stage-managed "unrest" to delegitimize the May 25 presidential election in the short term, thereby preventing consolidation of the post-Yanukovich political order.

The task for the West is to stabilize Ukraine by economic and political means and contain Russian expansionism. The Kremlin, unsurprisingly, is seeking to make any Western response as expensive and uncomfortable as possible, by implementing its destabilization strategy before our eyes, step by step, hoping that a frustrated Europe and U.S. will one day throw in the towel.

It is foreseeable that neither Russia nor the West will be strong enough to achieve its aims fully in Ukraine. It would therefore be sensible for both sides to try, together with the Ukrainians, to reconcile their interests. But that would require Putin to abandon his strategic ambitions, which he will never do so long as he can continue to slice the salami.

Dulling Putin's knife and ending the Ukraine crisis peacefully depends largely on the EU. Sanctions will not impress Putin — he and his cronies are isolating Russia economically and financially more effectively than most sanctions could — peaceful yet tangible political steps within Europe will.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has made the right suggestion here: prompt

establishment of a European energy union, starting with a market for natural gas and including joint external representation and a common pricing policy. This step, combined with further differentiation among supplier countries and progress toward implementing renewable energy technologies, would invert the balance of power between the EU, Russia's most important customer for oil and natural gas, and the Kremlin.

If, at the same time, Poland resolved to join the euro at the earliest possible opportunity, Putin's challenge to Eastern Europe would receive a powerful and completely peaceful answer. And Poland would assume the role of a major player at the center of an increasingly integrated Europe.

It has largely been Germany that has opposed integrating Europe's energy and natural gas markets. After the tragedy in Ukraine, no one in Berlin will be able to defend this stance, particular given that Germany's leaders do not want to confront Russia through sanctions. There will no longer be any room for excuses about why an energy union should be rejected. Everyone knows now what this communality called Europe is about. To borrow from Aesop's "The Braggart": Hic Rhodus, hic salta! Enough said, Europe. Now show us!

Joschka Fischer was German foreign minister and vice chancellor from 1998 to 2005. © Project Syndicate

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