

Why Russia and the West Cannot Dump Each Other Over Ukraine

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As the initial shock over the Malaysia Airlines plane disaster in Ukraine subsides, the governments of Russia and the U.S. appear to be adopting a more conciliatory rhetoric toward each other, demonstrating the constraints that drive their foreign policies.

While the U.S. attempted to consolidate all major Western powers in an attempt to isolate Russia, all the individual states have their own economic and political interests at stake that they were ultimately unwilling to sacrifice for the common goal, pundits said Wednesday.

"The anti-Russian rhetoric is only a cover directed at the internal public in these countries. At the core there are tangible interests that ultimately drive foreign policy," said Mikhail Pogrebinsky, director of the Kiev-based Center of Political Studies and Conflictology.

"All parties have already got public opinion at home into the shape that they desired. This goal is fulfilled and now they need to see how they will cooperate with Russia in the new situation," he said in a phone interview from Kiev.

Mutual Dependence

Russia and the West are locked in mutual cooperation in resolving Iran's nuclear program. The U.S. largely depends on Russia for moving troops and military equipment away from Afghanistan through NATO's northern distribution network and transportation hub in the Russian city of Ulyanovsk, and also for maintaining security in Central Asia.

In addition, according to many analysts, Russia's participation is essential in international efforts to resolve the ongoing war in Syria and the most recent wave of violence in Iraq.

Russia and Europe's bilateral trade was worth more than \$400 billion in 2012, according to EU figures.

About 6,000 German companies do business in Russia, while the jobs of 350,000 German workers depend on Russian trade, according to the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations, an organization representing Germany's main business lobbies.

About a third of the gas consumed by Europe is supplied by Russia and is largely delivered via Ukrainian territory. Antagonizing Moscow carries the risk of fueling the conflict in Ukraine further, bringing with it the prospect of disrupted gas supplies to European customers due to instability in the transit country.

If third-tier industry-scale sanctions are imposed against Russia, its economy could dip into a recession, while if Russia sends troops into Ukraine, it could lose up to 20 percent of its GDP in several years, according to former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin.

Conciliatory Overtures

Since the crash, President Vladimir Putin has come under pressure both internationally and domestically, forcing him to search for the least damaging solution to the intensified confrontation with the West without abandoning Russia's interests in Ukraine.

While many conservative thinkers inside Russia have vouched for a more interventionist policy, Kudrin, one of the leaders of the loosely defined liberal camp, warned against that approach this week.

"There are forces in Russia that wanted to distance themselves [from the West], they wanted isolation, maybe some kind of independence," Kudrin told the state-run ITAR-Tass news agency in an extensive interview Tuesday.

"I am seriously worried that after this Ukrainian escalation we will adopt the idea that there is some kind of historical confrontation, that we do not need the world's expertise," he said.

Putin's solution to the need to cooperate with the West economically and keep a stake in Ukrainian politics has been to adopt a conciliatory stance and wait for emotions to subside, said Gleb Pavlovsky, head of the Effective Politics Foundation and a former political advisor

to Putin's administration.

"Half of the responsibility for this whole crisis lays with the hawkish rhetoric from all sides. The way what is happening is described in Washington, Kiev and Moscow resembles a wartime discourse, which completely blocks any compromise," Pavlovsky told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

"Today all parties are essentially hostages to the public opinion that they helped to agitate in the first place, which makes it difficult to reach a win-win solution. All sides have to present the situation as their victory, while the only way to end the crisis is to reach a compromise," he said.

U.S. Accusations

The U.S. also appeared to back off when it presented its report on the investigation into the MH17 crash on Tuesday. At a closed briefing with select journalists in Washington, U.S. intelligence officials said that they have no evidence that the missile that was used to down the plane came from Russia.

Russia is responsible for "creating the conditions" but there is no evidence of direct Russian involvement in the shooting down of the airliner, The Associated Press reported.

The rebels did likely shoot down the Kuala Lumpur-bound plane Thursday, mistaking it for a military plane, intelligence officials said, citing satellite photos, social media postings and other intercepts.

"The initial strain and tension with Western leaders was based on emotions and immediate political expediency, rather than facts," said Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

"I am sure that if the U.S. had unequivocal proof that the plane was shot down with Russian involvement, then nobody would hide that information," he said in a phone interview with The Moscow Times.

According to Trenin, the various sides have now realized that the crisis could lead to more civilian victims and therefore has to be solved politically.

EU Rifts

Internal divisions in the EU failed to produce the consensus Tuesday needed to support the tough talk of sanctions initiated by Washington immediately following the crash.

The British cross-party Commons Committee on Arms Export Controls on Wednesday accused the British government of failing to halt arms exports to Russia, saying that export licenses worth \$225 million still remain in force.

The revelation prompted accusations of hypocrisy directed at British Prime Minister David Cameron.

Cameron had earlier urged the French government to scrap a deal to sell two Mistral-class

helicopter carriers to Russia. The head of France's ruling Socialist party, Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, said that Cameron must "start by cleaning up his own backyard," referring to the number of Russian oligarchs in Britain and the strength of financial ties between Moscow and London.

"Every state leader has his own interests, be it upcoming elections or economic policy, and they act strictly within this logic," Pogrebinsky said.

But even if world leaders have managed to take a step back now and ease tensions, it does not mean that the crisis is over, said Pavlovsky.

"The difficulty with this crisis is that every attempt at a political resolution — and there have been five or six already — has been followed by a sudden flare-up of tensions," he said.

"Putin has adopted a course of de-escalation now, but he is also a hostage of the propaganda policy of the past year. He cannot just come out and say that he has made the decision to stop it all," he added.

See also:

[Victims of MH17 Tragedy Sent to Netherlands, Black Boxes Arrive in Britain](#)

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