

In the Ukraine Conflict, Everyone's a Loser

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Ukraine's parliament ratified a landmark association agreement with the EU on Tuesday.

Speaking before the legislature, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko referred to European integration as the country's "national idea." Poroshenko also mentioned that the deal's key free-trade element has been postponed until 2016. In the meantime Ukraine, the EU and Russia will continue to deliberate the future trade regime at trilateral meetings.

This is precisely where the Maidan protest movement kicked off last November, when the first 2,000 pro-Europe protesters turned out to Kiev's Independence Square.

At the time, the government of President Viktor Yanukovich — which was ousted in February after three months of increasingly violent protests that claimed more than 100 lives — made a decision to suspend for one year the signing of the EU agreement, citing concerns of potential trade losses with Russia.

And a trilateral dialogue over the Ukraine-EU deal is essentially what President Vladimir Putin

has wanted all along: to be a party to the talks and to have a say in what Ukraine's future will look like.

Thus the Ukraine saga has come full circle, and it appears utterly unbelievable that in order to reach something that was already on the table just under a year ago, the country has had to incur a staggering loss of human life and devastation to its economic infrastructure, while in the wider world — Russia and the West have sustained the worst meltdown in diplomatic relations since the Cold War.

Barely an hour before ratifying the EU deal, Ukraine's parliament also passed a bill offering rebel-held territories in the country's turbulent east self-rule for a period of three years.

At least 3,000 lives have already been lost in the eastern battlefields, and more than 310,000 individuals have been internally displaced as a result of the armed conflict there, according to the latest United Nations statistics.

So have all of these losses been in vain?

Ukrainian government officials and nationalist pundits would argue that the political transition and months of civic activism have transformed the country forever, allowing it to shake off the yoke of its Soviet past, and catapulting it into the family of modern European nations.

Western powers — which have accused Russia of an illicit land grab in Crimea, destabilization of cross-border trade and an outright invasion of the country's east — would argue that if not for these alleged interferences, the process would have been smooth and peaceful.

Putin, on the other hand, has argued that if not for a Western-backed, unconstitutional coup in Kiev, the Ukrainian government would not have been overthrown, and regional interest groups on the other side of the country would not have launched fights for either partial autonomy or total independence from Kiev.

In the same way that the past decade has failed to rectify divergent political views on the 2004 Orange Revolution, these diverse interpretations will not fade any time soon.

Still, it is clear that all sides in the conflict have incurred substantial losses, seemingly for the sake of upholding their respective interpretations of whether Ukraine is European or Russian, and who is to blame for its misfortunes.

The Ukrainian people will have to endure a 6.5 percent contraction of their country's economy, as predicted by the International Monetary Fund. The loss of heavy industry and infrastructure in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions can be expected to further exacerbate these losses.

The European Union will suffer from lost opportunities of economic cooperation with Russia, as well as the potential disruption of gas supplies in the winter. In addition, EU unity has been called into question, with Ukraine serving as the newest point of division.

Russia will lose at least 1 percent of its annual economic growth due to sanctions, according to former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin.

The isolationism and besieged-fortress atmosphere that have been embraced by the Russian public are likewise dangerous. Having come to be recognized in the popular Russian consciousness as self-interested and crude, the West no longer serves as a model for most Russians, including the younger generations.

Finally, the international community has lost because Russia's cooperation with the West in general, and the U.S. in particular, has served as the primary driving force behind enforcement of the global nuclear proliferation regime. Recent spats and mutual accusations of violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which protects Europe from immediate nuclear threat, are a worrying sign.

In addition, Russia's cooperation with the West is one of the main cornerstones of the international fight against terrorism in the Middle East and beyond. For the self-proclaimed Islamic State, a radical terrorist organization that has wreaked havoc in Syria and Iraq, there is no difference between Russia and the U.S. In the eyes of the terrorist organization, both nations are comprised of infidels, and both need to be physically destroyed. It is obvious that neither Russia nor the U.S. will stage acts of terror against one another, no matter how strenuous the bilateral relations may become, whereas the Islamic State would not think twice given the opportunity.

According to Gleb Pavlovsky, former advisor to Putin's presidential administration, 90 percent of the Ukraine crisis is belligerent rhetoric, emanating from all sides.

When Ukraine ratified an EU association agreement while postponing a key element on Tuesday, and practically simultaneously legitimized self-rule in the country's east, it became clearer than ever just how much was sacrificed for the sake of saving face, and how much easier it could have been to reach a solution that would have suited all sides, without leaving blood on anyone's hands.

All sides to the conflict have miscalculated the extent to which a simple trade agreement is emblematic of their adversaries' vested interests. What's happening in Ukraine is not a political, but rather a civilizational crisis with both Russia and the West underestimating the historic forces at play.

The tragedies of Ukraine have reminded us of this of this stark reality. Following the Minsk accords it seems that policymakers have finally realized this too, even if they cannot openly declare it, having been circumvented by warmongering public opinion at home.

We urge policymakers and statesmen to use this new-found clarity as a basis upon which to build forward-looking, long-term strategies, letting short-sighted political opportunities fall by the wayside.

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