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European Diplomats Seek Security Overhaul to End East-West Crisis

By The Moscow Times

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Former German Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger pictured at the Munich Security Conference in 2010.

PARIS — Even as tension in Ukraine mounts anew, veteran diplomats are starting to think quietly about a way out of the worst East-West crisis since the end of the Cold War.

It may seem a poor time to imagine a revamped security architecture for Europe when a frail cease-fire in eastern Ukraine is violated daily, raising the stakes in another "frozen conflict" in the post-Soviet space surrounding Russia.

The U.S. and the European Union have imposed three waves of sanctions on Moscow over its annexation of Crimea and support for pro-Russian separatists in southeast Ukraine.

Yet despite President Vladimir Putin's diatribes against the West, neither Russia nor Europe has an interest in a long-term confrontation that has already damaged both sides' economies and could undermine stability across eastern Europe.

So wise heads such as former German Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger, chairman of the Munich Security Conference, and Igor Yurgens, chairman of the Institute for Contemporary Development in Moscow, who is close to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, are scouring the diplomatic handbook for a possible exit.

While Ischinger calls Russia's behavior in Ukraine unacceptable and supports sanctions, he believes a strengthened Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) could be a vehicle for eventually moving beyond the crisis.

In the short run, he wants an international contact group made up of Russia, the U.S., the European Union and the Ukrainian government to oversee implementation of the cease-fire accords signed in Minsk in September between Ukraine and the pro-Russian rebels.

In the longer term, he says Serbia, the incoming chairman in office of the OSCE for 2015, and Germany, declared candidate to chair the 57-state organisation in 2016, should work to develop a new charter on European security.

"The objective should be to strengthen both rules and institutions, including the OSCE, and to review such projects as the 2008 Medvedev security treaty proposal," Ischinger said.

Under Medvedev's plan, outlined weeks before a brief war between Russia and Georgia, no nation or alliance operating in the Euro-Atlantic region would be entitled to strengthen its own security at the cost of other nations or organizations

Yurgens, who has criticized Putin's policy in Ukraine, said the Medvedev initiative deserved a more constructive response than it had received.

The West brushed off the proposal at the time because it seemed a blatant attempt to give Russia a veto over decisions by the U.S.-led NATO alliance, such as admitting new members or deploying U.S. missile defenses in Europe.

Putin has since taken the opposite route with unilateral military action in Crimea and by establishing a Eurasian Union, including Belarus and Kazakhstan, as a Russian-centered counterweight to the EU.

The struggle for Ukraine is precisely over Kiev's choice to move towards the EU rather than join that Eurasian Union.

Child of Detente

If some statesmen are looking to the OSCE now, it is because it emerged from a previous era of bloc rivalry to provide a framework for limiting and channelling geopolitical competition.

Created at a 1975 pan-European summit during a period of detente in the East-West conflict, the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe enshrined key ground rules including sovereignty, territorial integrity and chapters on human rights and economic cooperation.

It set a framework for talks that eventually led to a treaty limiting conventional armed forces in Europe, with confidence-building measures such as prior notice of military exercises

and the right to send observers to them.

When the Cold War ended, 34 nations solemnly signed the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, codifying commitments to sovereignty, territorial integrity but also democracy, human rights, the rule of law and economic liberty.

"We need to create the conditions for some repeat operation of the Paris Charter of 1990," Ischinger said, noting that Putin had praised the positive role of the OSCE in the Ukraine crisis.

The document pledged "a new quality in our security relations while fully respecting each other's freedom of choice in that respect". That was taken in the West as an acceptance by Moscow that former Soviet bloc states were free to join NATO and the EU if they chose.

However after 12 central European states joined NATO, Putin sought to draw a red line against any further eastward expansion of the alliance to include Ukraine or Georgia. Russian diplomats have praised the example of Finland, which remained neutral and friendly towards Moscow in security terms while pursuing economic integration into Europe.

In Western eyes, Moscow's military seizure of Crimea was a flagrant breach of OSCE principles. In Moscow's view, it was a response to the wishes of the overwhelmingly ethnic Russian population, and a move to prevent its Crimean naval base of Sevastopol from falling into NATO's hands.

The Ukraine conflict has reminded governments of the utility of the OSCE, the only security forum connecting all European and North American states. At best it serves bridge-building and face-saving. At worst it is a talking shop paralyzed by having to take decisions by unanimity.

It performs tasks such as observing elections and monitoring cease-fires, but Moscow barred OSCE observers from Crimea.

How a revised European security charter could stabilize the countries between Russia and NATO is unclear. Many Western officials privately acknowledge Crimea is lost, although their governments will not accept that officially.

The West is unlikely to formally renounce letting Ukraine and Georgia into NATO one day if they meet the criteria and want to join. But many Western officials now acknowledge that will be a distant day, if ever.

Ischinger, who served for more than a decade with Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the West German foreign minister who was a tireless promoter of the OSCE over deep U.S. suspicions, said there was a precedent for dealing with such problems.

"The Helsinki Final Act didn't settle the final status of Germany or the Baltic states," he said, "But it did spell out that they couldn't be settled by force."

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