

Russia Must Forget Yalta and Face Facts in Minsk

By [Vladimir Ryzhkov](#)

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Today the whole world will anxiously await news from Minsk, where the "Normandy Four" — Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France — will try to reach a second agreement, a sort of "Minsk II" settlement to stop the war in eastern and southern Ukraine. The United States will not take part, but German Chancellor Angela Merkel met with U.S. President Barack Obama in Washington on Monday to clarify his position.

The U.S. and the European Union have differences of opinion regarding the Ukrainian crisis, although publicly they deny any rift in their underlying unity.

The Europeans are categorically opposed to, and fear, any expansion of war in Europe and they are striving to find a political solution to the crisis as quickly as possible. Britain, along with the rest of Europe, therefore openly opposes the direct provision of lethal weapons to Kiev. They are concerned that it would escalate the conflict and result in more deaths among soldiers and civilians in Ukraine.

Merkel said that after her meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, she understood that Russia would not, under any circumstances, permit the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics to suffer military defeat. Europe advocates diplomatic dialogue with Moscow and the continued use of sanctions as a non-military and effective approach, and as the only acceptable way to influence Moscow.

Obama continues to exercise caution and has so far refused to supply weapons to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. However, he is under growing pressure from a Congress that is determined to mount a stronger response to the Kremlin by adding stiffer sanctions and beginning the large-scale transfer of arms to Kiev.

A bipartisan group of senators that includes Senator John McCain has criticized the positions of both Merkel and Obama and proposes the immediate delivery of Western weapons to the Ukrainian army. Given the widely divergent approaches advocated by Moscow, Kiev, the European Union, the separatists in Ukraine and within the U.S. government itself, it is difficult to imagine how a universally satisfactory settlement could emerge.

Meanwhile, Moscow has nostalgically celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Crimea Conference in Yalta where the victorious Allied powers met in February 1945. Crimea hosted an anniversary academic conference to commemorate the event and officials even erected a bronze statue in honor of the "Big Three" — former Soviet leader Josef Stalin, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt — in a park near Livadia Palace.

That move immediately elicited loud protests from the Crimean Tartars because in May 1944 Stalin deported their entire community — 183,155 men, women and children — to the eastern reaches of the Soviet Union. However, other Russians experience nostalgia for the superpower status the Soviet Union held during those years and for the principle by which a few "great powers" could divvy up the world among themselves.

Speaking before the most recent security conference in Munich, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov mentioned the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Accords of 1975 that determined the post-war division of Europe and its post-war borders.

With regard to Yalta in 1945 and the Helsinki Accords in 1975, Moscow now emphasizes the division of the world between the great powers and the inviolability of the borders of their zones of influence. For their part, the United States and its allies contend that the significance of Yalta ended in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

For them, the most important aspect of the Helsinki Final Act was not the division of Europe into spheres of influence governed by East and West, but the inviolability of the borders of the European states liberated from the control of the Soviet Union.

Munich conference participants pointed out that the incompatibility of the two approaches. It is impossible to return to the days and practices of Yalta. The world has irrevocably changed since then. In particular, it is now impossible to ignore the will of the people themselves, as was done 70 years ago.

In November 2014, against the backdrop of the loss of Crimea and the fighting in southern

and eastern Ukraine, 51 percent of Ukrainians favored accession to NATO, while only 25 percent were opposed. Also, 57 percent wanted Ukraine to join the EU, while only 16 percent wanted to join the Customs Union with Russia.

The population of Moldova is more divided than that of Ukraine. In November, 51 percent of Moldovans favored integration with Europe whereas 49 percent did not. Most Moldovans would like the country to have neutral status.

According to different surveys, between 63 and 80 percent of all Georgians would like their country to join NATO and more than 70 percent favor accession to the EU. Both Belarus and Kazakhstan did not support Russia's annexation of Crimea. Azerbaijan, Moldova and Ukraine voted against Russia in the UN General Assembly on a resolution concerning the referendum held in Crimea in March 2014.

Yalta is now part of history. Even if, as we sincerely hope, it proves possible to stop the war in eastern Ukraine and create a pro-Moscow enclave there along the lines of the self-proclaimed republic of Transdnestr, Moscow cannot stop the historical process by which the former Soviet republics become independent and sovereign states.

Nor can Moscow constantly impose its own will on those states, not least because it is failing to modernize at home and has increasingly little to offer potential partners.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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