

# Minsk Deal Is Playing Into Moscow's Hands

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The best that could be said about the Minsk II agreement is that it allows Russia to pursue its strategic objectives in Ukraine through means other than war.

The deal does not grant Moscow's wish of establishing effective control over Ukraine's foreign and defense policies, but, unlike the previous Minsk agreement, it creates a political process that gives the Kremlin an indirect say in shaping Ukraine's strategic choices.

Moscow's interest in the deal, apart from warding off Western sanctions, lies in forcing Kiev to negotiate directly with the Donetsk and Luhansk republics over the scope of their future autonomy within a "redesigned" Ukrainian state under a new constitution.

The Minsk II document requires Kiev to haggle with the separatists, and by their proxy with Moscow, over all sorts of things — from arrangements for local elections and restoration of social benefits to the formation of a "people's militia," and the framework for the new Ukrainian constitution that would grant the separatist regions a "permanent special status."

To guarantee that Kiev is incentivized to engage with the separatists, Moscow conditioned the transfer of the state border with Russia to Ukrainian control with the completion of the "political settlement" and "constitutional reform."

Given that Moscow and Kiev view the results of such "constitutional reform" differently, with Russia seeing the "special status" extending to veto power over Ukraine's foreign policy, it ensures a messy bargaining process giving Moscow plenty of leverage.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko lacks the votes in parliament to push through such constitutional changes and he has been politically weakened by the unfair deal in Minsk.

Moscow will be well positioned to exploit internal fissures in Ukrainian politics to secure a hold on Kiev's policies. In Kiev, Russia would use the "constitutional reform" to engineer the unraveling of the ruling coalition of pro-Western parties, bringing down the government of Arseniy Yatsenyuk, whom Moscow views as an "American puppet."

With Poroshenko now hostage to Russia's goodwill to return Ukraine's territory, he could be "persuaded" to form a new ruling coalition with the Opposition Bloc — made up of holdovers from the regime of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich — and slow down on European integration.

This would bring Moscow within reach of its ultimate objective — control over Ukraine's future.

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

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