

Will Moscow Push for Settlement in Ukraine?

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

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Moscow is sending conflicting signals about its plans for Ukraine. For once, there are signs it is seeking an honorable exit and a comprehensive settlement.

Ukrainian sources report that Moscow, through business channels that include the CEO of one state-owned oil major, is quietly sounding out Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko on a grand bargain that would include Russia's final withdrawal from the Donbass with Ukraine's recognition of Russia's sovereignty over Crimea in exchange for about \$100 billion in debt forgiveness, gas price rebates and other financial incentives. If confirmed, this would be a smart move that this column has repeatedly advocated.

Russia is also sounding out the EU about staging another self-determination referendum in Crimea under OSCE monitoring.

Strangely though, Moscow is throwing a wrench into the Minsk II process just when it was turning its way. On June 2, the leader of the Donetsk separatists Alexander Zakharchenko

announced that the DNR would hold local elections on Oct. 18, a week before similar elections in Ukraine.

This is self-defeating since, with prodding from Brussels and Washington, Kiev was moving toward holding the local elections in the separatist territories as in the rest of Ukraine. If Moscow played its cards right, this election could have produced legitimate pro-Russian authorities, with whom Kiev would have to negotiate the special status envisioned under Minsk II.

It is Moscow's response to the constitutional changes unveiled by Poroshenko last week that provide for substantial decentralization of power to Ukraine's regions.

This is consistent with Minsk II, which does not require that the "special status" be written into the Constitution. Moscow's complaint is that Ukraine's constitutional reform has not been agreed beforehand with the separatists, but this is not what Minsk II requires either.

"Russia wants to write the future Ukrainian constitution, and Ukraine wants to prevent that," says Carnegie Europe scholar Ulrich Speck. "The question is how much of a Russian role the West will accept in the formulation of Ukraine's new constitution? It won't accept a constitution that violates basic principles of sovereignty."

Moscow needs to decide soon what it wants more — reaching a comprehensive settlement and an honorable exit or drafting a new Ukrainian constitution to ensure its control over Ukraine. The two goals are incompatible.

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