

From Vicious to Virtuous: Transforming the Ukraine Crisis

The EU can create a lasting peace by sticking to its (lack of) guns

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Given the rising death toll in Eastern Ukraine, reports of a ceasefire deal in Minsk are a very welcome development. However, rather than merely halting the war, the EU, Ukraine and Russia need to create a lasting peace. Calls for the West to arm Ukraine – a misguided attempt to [level the killing field](#) – has overshadowed previous proposals from EU leaders to create a [free trade area with Russia](#) in the long-term. However, this is the approach that offers the greatest hope for a long-term solution that can transform the conflict, EU-Russia relations and even Russia itself. It would benefit all concerned – apart from the Putin regime – but it faces many obstacles, not least within the EU itself. The EU needs to assuage the concerns that some of its member states have about engaging with Russia and with the Putin regime. If this can be done, the EU can also begin to establish a foreign policy that adheres to its values and perhaps even begin to address its own internal crisis of confidence.

Analysis: Escalation, Caution or Transformation

The war has strained EU-Russia relations to breaking point and dragged both parties into a vicious cycle of mutual antagonism and tit-for-tat sanctions. All the while the violence in Eastern Ukraine escalates and spreads, with thousands dead and hundreds of thousands displaced, as the Russian-backed rebels have tried to change the facts on the ground ahead of any settlement. A recent report by senior US Foreign Policy figures advocated sending up to a billion dollars of [arms to the Ukrainian military](#) in order to raise the cost of further Russian/Separatist expansion by giving the Ukrainian army better capabilities to counter Russian armour and rebel artillery and rocket batteries. [Liberal hawks](#) in the [media](#) have rallied around this idea, which has also attracted the support of incoming US Secretary of Defence [Ashton Carter](#) and NATO Supreme Commander [Robert Breedlove](#).

Critics have highlighted the shortcomings of the plan. The [time it would take to ship the weapons and train Ukrainian soldiers](#) to use them provides ample opportunity and incentive for the Putin regime to preemptively escalate the situation. The potential for [greater Russian escalation](#) than the West would be able to match is also clear. The supplies would lend credence to Putin's claims that the rebels in Ukraine are fighting against a NATO foreign legion, further damaging prospects of a lasting solution. Escalation through arms-supply may also be based on a [misperception](#) of the Russian position, which is actually based on weakness rather than strength and therefore 'balancing' of this kind would inflame rather than stabilise the situation.

However, both proponents and critics of arming Ukraine overlook the most hopeful possibility for long-term conflict transformation – the [German proposal](#) to explore the possible creation of a [free trade zone between the EU and Russia](#), providing the fighting stops in the short-term and other conditions are met when the time comes. This plan, which draws on the EU's history of transforming long-standing geopolitical conflict into interdependent and mutually beneficial relations, has also been advocated by [analysts](#) who see the possibility to positively enmesh the nascent Eurasian Economic Union with the European Union that it mimics in form, but not in substance. This would stay true to tried and tested EU ways and means of engagement, despite [claims](#) that these will not work with Russia, which are used to justify division rather than integration. The EU has proved such doubters wrong in the past, particularly in relation to its Eastern members, and it can do so again by sticking to rather than deviating from its principles.

Outlook: Hope Amidst Tragedy

The provisional deal agreed at Minsk should be cautiously welcomed but, in the longer term, transforming the security situation depends on the extent to which the various parties buy into a bigger vision. Any move to military escalation, from the rebels, the Ukrainian army or their respective allies will reduce the possibility of finding a long-term solution. However, the very possibility of a long-term solution can reduce the prospect of escalation. The EU's combination of sanctions in the short-term, with transformational engagement in the long-term is the key to both stopping the killing and creating a peaceful and potentially prosperous future for Ukrainians, Russians and for EU citizens. One of the biggest challenges that the EU faces in this regard is convincing some of its [member states](#), particularly those that border Russia, that engagement is preferable to antagonism or to preparing for an even wider war that would risk becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy

Recommendations:

- ◆ **The EU** should stick to its principles and practices that have helped it overcome geopolitical conflict in the past - the Ukraine crisis shows the need for more of this approach rather than less.
- ◆ **The EU** should explicitly link the 'carrot' of free-trade negotiations not only to implementation of any ceasefire, but also to a sustainable political solution, which they actually make more likely
- ◆ **The EU and its member states** should refrain from arming the Ukrainian military and should dissuade their American allies from attempting to do so. Sanctions, accompanied by the possibility of
- ◆ **EU member states** should carefully consider the security implications of variously antagonising or engaging with Russia.
- ◆ **The EU** should eschew Russophobia but try to its bring sceptical member states on board, addressing their legitimate concerns and offer emolliating concessions in other policy areas.

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