What is exactly stopping a solution to the crisis in eastern Ukraine?

By this time, it should be obvious that the west does not want a conflict in Ukraine to be resolved any time soon. If that were the case, it would apply pressure to both parties of the conflict: the government in Kiev and the separatists in Donbas. Instead, the west applies pressure to the third party: the Russian government, admittedly the separatists' best friend and supplier, but not the one that has direct stakes in the conflict at hand.

Let us recount those stakes. For Kiev: territorial integrity, full sovereignty over Donbas, and the right to determine its foreign policies independently from external influences (or so the government spokespersons in Kiev say).

For Donbas: linguistic and cultural autonomy, elements of a robust home rule, the right to preserve a privileged relationship with the Russian Federation, and amnesty to the local separatist leaders and militiamen.

Does Russia have stakes separate from any of these? Not that I know of. Putin keeps repeating the separatists' demands: an amnesty, local autonomy; full implementation of the Minsk agreements. In spite of what we hear so often in the west, there are no separate demands presumably infringing on Ukraine’s sovereignty; Russia says nothing about whether Ukraine should or should not join the EU, should or should not claim Donbas as its own, should or should not be friendly with Russia itself. Yes, the Kremlin would be extremely disappointed were Ukraine to join NATO. Even so, the Kremlin has more than once assured the world it did not claim to have a veto over Ukraine's foreign policy choices.

All the same, demanding that Russia seal the border and stop the influx of volunteers into the conflict zone is extremely unrealistic. Putin staked his reputation on support of Russia’s so-called compatriots in the near abroad; his abandoning those compatriots to the gallows would sink his presidency.

What is, then, the solution and is it even possible?

It seems the solution is possible, and it has been clearly defined in the Minsk agreements. The problem is, Kiev does not want to implement them, and therefore protracts the conflict.

Firstly, the promised amnesty to the separatists has never been announced. Ukraine’s pundits are musing over who should be pardoned and who should not. Those with blood on their hands should not be pardoned, seems to be the common wisdom. Not a word about the blood of civilians in Donbas killed in the process of carrying out Kiev’s so-called Anti-Terrorist Operation. With such an attitude, the choice facing the Donbas militia leaders seems to be simple: continue fighting or face imprisonment (or worse) at the hand of the Ukrainian authorities. Why are we surprised they keep fighting?

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Secondly, the Minsk agreements called for extensive home rule provisions for Donbas, and for a requisite change in the Constitution of Ukraine.

None of this seems to be in the works. The latest proposal on changes to the Constitution of Ukraine,
dated July 1, 2015, has nothing about a special status for the affected regions of Donbas beyond a fuzzy promise – in the law, not in the Constitution itself – that the ‘special modalities of local governance in separate regions of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti will be determined by a separate law’.

This is not what the Government of Ukraine promised its partners when talking about the implementation of the Minsk Agreements.

Thirdly, the Minsk Agreements call for the ‘linguistic self-definition’ of the affected regions or, in short, the right to continue using Russian as the language of daily communication and local governance. Official Kiev keeps quiet on the issue.

Finally, according to the Minsk agreements, Ukraine should support social and economic development of the affected regions of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In the meantime, since November 2014, no pensions have been paid to the retired Ukrainian citizens living in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics.

Although Kiev has not begun implementing even the first basic point of the Minsk agreements (the ‘immediate and comprehensive cease-fire’ in Donbas), the west seems to be fully okay with that. Well, the separatists fire on Ukraine’s positions, the Ukrainian army should return fire, so goes the conventional explanation.

What if the Ukrainian army didn’t return fire? Would it risk losing an inch more territory? The answer is far from obvious, yet the regular army continues using heavy artillery in densely populated civilian areas in Donbas (and killing unarmed civilians in the process). This fact alone should have moved Ukraine’s western sponsors to an obvious course of action: press the Ukrainian government to stop abusing human rights of its own citizens in eastern Ukraine.

It is almost exactly a year since Human Rights Watch, in an open communication to President Poroshenko, lamented the actions of the Ukrainian army and the pro-government militias, in particular the shelling of a hospital in Krasny Liman and air strikes in the villages of Luhanskaya and Kondrashevka.

The civil war in Ukraine has generated a humanitarian catastrophe that can only be resolved with the joint efforts of all parties concerned, the USA and the EU included. It goes without saying, Kiev should be prepared to sit together at the same table with separatist leaders and offer them some concessions before any deal can be reached.

Instead, Kiev promises an amnesty after the elections, and a law on the status of territories after Ukraine’s full control over its eastern borders is restored. To many an observer inside and outside, this must look like deceiving one’s opponent and negotiating in bad faith. Yet western powers stand firm in their resolve to lay all the blame for the failure of the Minsk agreement at Russia’s feet.

Last month, at the G-7 meeting in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, western powers agreed to keep sanctions against Russia in place until the Minsk agreements are implemented in full. The Canadian government went further than the rest of the G-7 nations, having decided not only to keep, but to expand the sanctions with the blacklisting of Gazprom, its oil subsidiary Gazprom Neft, Russia’s state-owned Transneft and a major oil producer Surgutneftegaz. In addition, Canada decided to sanction a conservative nationalist philosopher Alexander Dugin and Eurasian Youth Union, a non-governmental organization known for its pro-Putin views.

All of this looks more than somewhat one-sided given a recent revelation that Canada’s embassy in Kiev was used as a base for anti-government protesters to re-group and re-cuperate during the Maidan uprising that toppled former president Viktor Yanukovych.

As for Canada’s big brother, the United States, it has publicly admitted spending $5.1 billion to support
democracy-building programs in Ukraine since 1992. While western champions of democracy have proudly claimed their right to interfere in internal affairs of a sovereign country for the sake of a regime change when it suited their interests, they do surprisingly little to stop continuing human rights abuses committed by Ukraine government troops and far-right militias in the pro-Russian Donbas.

If the Minsk agreements are ever to be implemented in full, there is no other way but for all sides to follow the agreed-upon commitments.

This includes, first and foremost, the immediate cessation of artillery barrages targeting Donbas cities and villages; further, the unequivocal and unconditional declaration of an amnesty for the Donbas fighters; and finally, a provision for Donbas autonomy enshrined into the Constitution of Ukraine before – not after – any local elections will be allowed to happen.

Only such a range of measures will ensure full withdrawal of Russian volunteers from Donbas, and Russian regular forces from the Russo-Ukrainian borderlands.

Only such a gambit will restore peace and a hope of prosperity to the whole of Ukraine. It is not Moscow, or Donetsk, or Luhansk that should make a first move. It is fully up to Kiev to choose between war and peace in Ukraine’s south east.