

# How Not to End the War in Ukraine

*Past Failures Make Clear That an Imposed  
Peace Won't Last*

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On February 18, Russian and U.S. officials met in Saudi Arabia to begin talks to end the war in Ukraine—the first such high-level dialogue to take place since the 2022 full-scale invasion, but one without Ukrainian representatives. Ahead of the talks, U.S. President Donald Trump made concessions to Russian President Vladimir Putin and has since told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that he was “gambling with World War III.” Accommodating Russian narratives and positions could turn out to be a provocative yet smart move to bring Putin to the table—but only if Trump sets high standards and demands once negotiations begin.

So far, President Trump’s steps toward negotiations have too strongly resembled the so-called Minsk process that began after Russia’s annexation of Crimea and occupation of parts of Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014. Negotiated by the so-called Normandy Four—the heads of state from France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine—the process produced two sets of agreements, Minsk I in 2014 and Minsk II in 2015, both of which set out terms for a cease-fire and outlined steps toward a political resolution in Donbas. These weak agreements were never properly implemented, and as Putin launched his 2022 invasion, he voided them outright.

The political and strategic context has changed dramatically since 2014. But the Minsk process’s bitter lessons remain more relevant than ever. Unfortunately, the new U.S.-led negotiations appear to replicate specific weaknesses from the Minsk process, such as excluding major parties to the conflict and rushing toward an undefined cease-fire with little enforcement and security guarantees. Like the current negotiations, the Minsk agreements sacrificed the complicated yet achievable prospect of durable peace for short-term diplomatic gains. If Trump truly wants to be the figure who brings the fighting between Russia and Ukraine to an end, he should not repeat Minsk’s mistakes.

## **IMPOSED DEALS**

By seeking an agreement in principle and postponing work on the details, in the mid-2010s the Kremlin set a trap that destroyed the Minsk agreements—a trick it appears to want to redo now. The Minsk process was not meant to proceed in two parts. The process was initiated by the Normandy Four through the Trilateral Contact Group, which included

representatives from Russia, Ukraine, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). But Minsk I, signed on September 5, 2014, failed to stop Russian advances. After months of continued fighting and a devastating Ukrainian military defeat at Debaltseve, a second agreement, Minsk II, was negotiated and signed on February 12, 2015.

Although the Normandy Four were meant to provide an inclusive format, Ukrainian interests were de facto eliminated from the Minsk negotiations because the country's military and civilian apparatuses were in very weak positions—and because both Russia's and Kyiv's allies exerted intense pressure to rush to a quick deal. The signing of both Minsk agreements followed major Ukrainian military defeats in which Kyiv lost important territories around Ilovaik and Debaltseve, and suffered significant casualties.

As a result, Ukrainians perceived the Minsk agreements as imposed on them, and many rejected them outright. For example, in 2019, Ukrainian civil society activists, opposition politicians, and war veterans launched a social movement called “No to Capitulation!” which mobilized mass protests against political concessions to Russia under the Minsk framework. In a [poll](#) conducted by the Rating Group and released in mid-February 2022, 63 percent of Ukrainians agreed with the statement that the “[Minsk] accords should be revised, and the new ones signed,” and only 11 percent agreed that Ukraine should fulfill all of the Minsk process's demands. In part, Ukrainians never accepted the Minsk process as legitimate because Kyiv agreed to untenable compromises.

## **TROJAN HORSE**

The Minsk agreements also recommended that Russian troops leave occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, but only if local elections were held and if occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk were granted “special status” in Ukraine, with the potential right to control their own police forces and to appoint judges and prosecutors—a privilege no other Ukrainian regions had at the time. Russia touted this provision as a step toward a federal model for Ukraine. But although such an increase in regional autonomy could be interpreted as democratic, democracy under occupation does not work. Such an arrangement would have given Russia a Trojan horse to undermine Ukraine's pro-Western course from within.

Although the parties agreed to elections in Donetsk and Luhansk during the Minsk I negotiations, they disputed the timing. In November 2014, the republics, still occupied by Russian forces, conducted local elections unilaterally, claiming that such elections had to occur before troops could leave. But Ukraine, the OSCE, and Western partners viewed

these elections as illegitimate and not in compliance with Minsk I, arguing that the troops were supposed to leave before elections took place, and that elections should occur under OSCE supervision. But the territories continued to be occupied by Russian-controlled forces, despite Russia's claim that it had no troops there, and in 2018, they again held similarly noncompliant elections.

Today, Russia also seeks to use negotiations to meddle in Ukraine's internal affairs, demanding Ukraine conduct hasty presidential elections (which would likely fall short of democratic standards), return privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, and restore the prominence of the Russian language. This time around, Ukraine's leaders, civil society groups, and citizens have been quicker to recognize and reject such tactics. But if the terms of a cease-fire are again decided by Moscow and other actors—in this case, Washington—without adequate Ukrainian participation from the start, Kyiv will not be able to safeguard its interests or convince Ukrainians of the deal's legitimacy, dooming its implementation. In a survey the Rating Group conducted in March 2024, more than half of Ukrainian respondents agreed that if they disputed the terms of a possible peace treaty they would "join a peaceful protest"; seven percent said they would join an "armed protest."

## **FAILED IMPLEMENTATION**

Because no cease-fire will satisfy Ukraine's or Russia's interests completely, any agreement will need strict third-party oversight and enforcement both during the deal's negotiation and after its signing. Enforcement provisions were fundamentally deficient in the Minsk agreements. Neither text once referenced guarantors or any consequences for violating the agreement.

Instead, there were two attempts to implement the Minsk agreements, but both mechanisms were poorly constructed. The first entrusted the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission—a body established in March 2014, before the military conflict really escalated, and later incorporated into Minsk I—with monitoring cease-fire violations and verifying that both sides had withdrawn heavy weapons from the frontline. But it did not attribute blame to any party for the violations it witnessed to any party, let alone restore compliance or apply penalties.

As the conflict continued to escalate, the parties attempted to engage more directly and quickly than through intermediaries from the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission. In September 2014, Russia and Ukraine established the Joint Center for Control and Coordination, an entity staffed by both Russian and Ukrainian military officers but which lacked any formal founding document. The idea was to allow witnesses to access both

sides of the front to better monitor any cease-fire violations. But that body also lacked sanctioning mechanisms, and any capabilities it had to enforce the agreements were kneecapped in 2017 when Russia withdrew its representatives and replaced them with emissaries from occupied Donetsk and Luhansk, again deflecting its own responsibility for the conflict by fronting its proxy actors. With no enforcement or even oversight, Russia could then repeatedly violate the agreements without any immediate repercussions.

The Minsk agreements' implementation was also impeded by ambiguity about who the signatory parties were and which of them had which obligations. The absence of obligations for Russia allowed Russia to manipulate its role and present itself as a mediator. Ultimately, everyone who ought to have been held accountable to the agreements was left with little clarity about whether the agreements were legally binding. Neither the Ukrainian nor Russian presidents signed Minsk I or II. And neither Ukraine's nor Russia's parliament ratified either agreement. (A UN Security Council Resolution did call on the parties to implement Minsk II in a 2015 resolution, but this appeal had little effect.) These defects could not be remedied by any consequent efforts; there were at least eight documents all together—including protocols, memoranda, addenda, and decisions by the Trilateral Contact Group—all contributed to the agreements' failure.

Making each sentence of an agreement, even if it is merely a cease-fire, as detailed and carefully worded as possible—spelling out obligations and creating specific deadlines and technical specifications for monitoring and accountability—strengthens accords against manipulation. Any agreement to end the war in Ukraine must more clearly provide for a much more robust enforcement mechanism, too. First, any settlement should include security measures that, in the case of a violation, would be invoked rapidly and independently. Russia will be particularly interested in minimizing security guarantees for Ukraine, and so such guarantees would preferably be agreed upon by Ukraine and its allies prior to negotiations with Russia. A cease-fire or peace agreement must also then integrate a monitoring, verification, and accountability mechanism that can objectively and quickly identify cease-fire violations, unambiguously attribute the fault to one of the parties, and most important, restore compliance—if necessary, by imposing sanctions for violations. Given the present lack of trust among the parties, a joint military peacekeeping mission, whose members all negotiating parties agree to, could be a way forward.

Technical solutions for enforcing a cease-fire will also need to account for the nature of modern warfare. The frontline in Ukraine currently stretches over 3,000 kilometers, with intense fighting taking place across approximately 970 kilometers. This is at least 10 times the size of the front during the Minsk negotiations. Any notion that such a large conflict

zone—expanded further by the use of drones, precision-guided missiles, and electronic warfare systems—can be controlled without robust enforcement is an illusion.

Finally, Europe will also need to play a large role—and a more disciplined and responsible one than it did in the mid-2010s. During the Minsk negotiations, France and Germany were mediators that brokered the hasty agreements and presided over the Trilateral Contact Group working groups that followed. They did resist recognizing the proxy republics that Russia established in Donetsk and Luhansk, but they erred badly, along with Ukraine, in allowing the proxy republics to sign the agreements, creating no clear obligations for Russia.

Today, most European countries seem to have grasped the extent to which Ukraine's security interests are also Europe's. The permissive attitude that marred the Minsk negotiations must be avoided—and unfortunately, both Russia and the United States have moved to exclude the very European countries that learned Minsk's bitter lessons from current talks. Europe needs a seat at the negotiating table; a unified position on the provision of security, military, and economic support to Ukraine; and alignment with Ukraine's negotiation strategy.

## **LOOKING TO THE LONG TERM**

Trump has set a time frame for reaching a cease-fire deal in Ukraine of days to months. At the same time, he has made no demands of Putin, and Russia continues to pressure Ukraine on the battlefield and attack civilian infrastructure throughout the country. Rushing an agreement is exactly the wrong approach, because it will allow Russia to manipulate negotiations. Even if Trump imagines that a temporary agreement can later be expanded upon, he cannot move so quickly. The war's frontlines must first be stabilized so that ongoing fighting does not muddy the talks. Then, avoiding Minsk's devastating ambiguity and enforcement defects will take time. It will require substantial preparation and coordination by parties, including Russia, Ukraine, and Europe, as well as the United States.

The Minsk negotiation process did facilitate a temporary de-escalation of hostilities. But ultimately, it undermined the search for a long-term solution, set the stage for a more devastating conflict, and tarnished the legacy of all involved with it. A resolution that applies Minsk's lessons will be essential to safeguarding U.S. interests, as well as Trump's reputation.