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Normandy Format and Munich Security Conference: controversial results

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Cautious hopes for the progress at the “Normandy Four” talks during Munich Security Conference did not materialize. Apparently, no concrete agreement was reached. The main result was the confirmation of the parties’ readiness to meet again in March.

In late December 2015 – mid January 2016 it looked like the Minsk process had good chances to move forward through clarification of the agreements reached and discussion of their possible execution [\[1\]](#):

- Russia appointed B. Gryzlov as its new representative in the negotiations of the 4 Working groups in Minsk, followed by his active dialogue with the Ukrainian President and other key figures;
- in January in Kaliningrad region V. Surkov met with V. Noulard, and that was interpreted by many as an indication that the USA – «grey cardinal» of the Ukrainian crisis – were joining the negotiation process;
- P. Poroshenko took measures to command the necessary number of votes in the

Supreme Rada to promote the constitutional reform;

- in early 2016 V. Putin in his interview to "Bild" praised the role of Germany in settling the Ukrainian crisis, recalling the constructive approach of the prominent German diplomat Egon Bahr;
- leaders of FRG and France began to put more pressure on Kiev urging it to speed up internal political reforms and the Minsk process;
- cease-fire regime was more or less observed along the borders of the self-proclaimed republics, and preparations of the local election started.

However from the second half of January positive news have been ceding ground to the negative ones. In the West the hostile attitude towards Russia acquired new breath. This time the criticism focused on Russian actions in the Middle East, which can be explained by the progress of the Syrian army, supported by Russian Air Force. Once again A. Merkel condemned Moscow during her visit to Turkey in early February.

Another anti-Russia cliché – «the threat from the East» – continued to be widely circulated in mass media. Active efforts in this respect were undertaken by NATO officials and politicians from Poland and Baltic states. On top of it, since mid January German Chancellor, Military Ombudsman and Defense Minister declared their support for bigger defense expenses [2].

On-going Russia bashing in the European Parliament, the notorious BBC Two film «World War Three: Inside the War Room», in which Russia initiates a tactic nuclear attack against NATO, mutual Russian – German accusations regarding the accident with the Russian speaking girl Lisa, resumption of skirmishes along the contact line in Donbas – all that formed the background for preparation of the Munich Security Conference.

During the conference the anti-Russia campaign continued, but certain aspects were new. Accusations of Moscow mainly split into two categories: «indiscriminate bombing» near Aleppo and «military threat» to the Eastern wing of NATO (along with ritual accusations of violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity). In general, the Ukrainian topic was put on the back burner and Western politicians were constantly referring to possibilities of cooperation with Russia.

A new «distribution» of blame for the situation in the southeast of Ukraine dominated: after the usual accusations of Moscow, Western politicians and diplomats, including J. Kerry, were turning to criticism of Kiev for slow progress in constitutional reforms, and poor results of fight with corruption. This «double accusation» formula was used even by NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg. At first he repeatedly mentioned the strategy of deterrence towards Moscow, including its nuclear component, but then he did not rule out the resumption of Russian – NATO Council meetings, as well as suggested mutual information exchange about military exercises.

The speech of D. Medvedev attracted attention especially due to his deep concern about the

Russia – West relations' sliding into the "new Cold War" and due to references to the Caribbean crisis of 1962. The core message of S. Lavrov was on indispensability of close cooperation between Russian and American military forces in fighting ISIS, and on concerns about conflicting signals from the US State Department (which supports the above idea) and from Pentagon (which rejects it).

What are the prospects of the Normandy Four in the light of its forthcoming meeting in March?

A lot depends on the development of internal political situation in Ukraine, primarily relations between Poroshenko and Yatsenyuk. The main risk is that both will use the anti-Russia card: the president – to strengthen his weakening positions, the prime minister – to cling on to power. While for Yatsenyuk this tactics is habitual, a potential refusal of Poroshenko as the main Ukrainian guarantor of Minsk-2 to carry it through may significantly aggravate the situation in the east of Ukraine. The growing potential of this threat has been demonstrated by recent leakings from the circle close to Poroshenko about "failure" of Minsk-2, which allegedly has fallen short of expectations and is unfavorable for Kiev.

The hope is that Berlin, Paris and maybe even Washington openly and discreetly will keep putting pressure on Kiev to stick to the agreements of February 2015. At the same time it is highly possible that Kiev and its foreign supporters will try to juggle with sequence of clauses of Minsk-2, especially with the one on the "restoration of the border control". As for the Ukrainian party, we may expect more provocative behavior and attempts if not to torpedo Minsk-2 but to broaden the Normandy format with some anti-Russia neighbors and to speculate on the future of Crimea.

The success of negotiations depends a lot on the position of Germany. However, as of mid February, neither the Federal Chancellor, nor the Foreign Minister were prepared to pursue constructive cooperation with Russian partners. As for the US, the presidential campaign, full of anti-Russia rhetoric, casts doubts on hopes that Washington in the near future may play a positive role in the settlement of the Ukrainian crisis.

[1] <http://instituteofeurope.ru/nauchnaya-zhizn/novosti/item/minsk-3-dlya-kieva-i-moskvy>

[2] http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=7234#top-content

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