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Eastern Europe: inching among contradictions

The conflict in Ukraine and the enduring conflict in Transdniestria are witnessing significant wavering within the Euro-Atlantic community, especially concerning the new US administration divided between confrontational posturing and hints towards a better direct communication with Putin on the issues of Ukraine, Syria and regarding other areas. Nevertheless some progress is remarkable and could signal a return to senses from all the main actors involved.

Since the war in Ukraine began in 2014, the United States has considered sending arms to the country. U.S. President Donald Trump approved the commercial (but not government to government) sale of lethal weapons to Ukraine on December 22, signing a \$41,5 million deal. The contract includes M107A1 heavy sniper rifles and other non-specified equipment (but excludes 35 FGM-148 Javelin command anti-tank launch units and 210 missiles) [*Trump administration approves lethal arms sales to Ukraine*, WP, 20/12/2017]. Apart predictably negative reactions from the Russian government and propaganda statements by some Ukrainian MP on Russian countermeasures against the Javelin missiles, it is evident that Moscow can counter US heavy arms sales with a mix of military equipment for the separatist forces, hybrid tactics and pressure on the Syrian theatre.

On the other hand also Putin has an interest avoiding escalation, lest the United States compound Russia's economic troubles with more sanctions. So far, at least, the arms deal has yet to aggravate hostilities along the front lines in eastern Ukraine [*A U.S.-Ukraine Weapons Deal Has Russia Up in Arms*, Stratfor Worldview, 10/01/2018].

On a very positive note in light of the Minsk agreements, the Russian and Ukrainian governments agreed on an exchange of prisoners at a meeting of their foreign ministers, their first in several years, which duly took place on December 27. It could be the first positive step for still very long process, prone to reciprocal Russia-US tit for tat moves. Moreover Moscow drafted a resolution for deploying

UN peacekeepers to the Donbass in all the areas in which the OSCE special monitoring mission operates.

Some positive steps, despite the bitter infighting in Chishinau, are seen also happening between the EU and Russia. Moscow chose not to overly politicize the issue of the establishment of Moldovan-Ukrainian customs checkpoints along the common border, and also accepted Transdnistria's de facto accession to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area between Moldova and the EU.

On the one hand Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have no immediate prospects of joining the EU, because unable to implement significant reforms due to their anocracies, But on the other Moscow cannot fail to see that they still seek closer ties with the EU and will reject Moscow's formulas for resolving their conflicts, while the growing financial costs of maintaining the status quo in these conflicts is denting already stretched finances [Andrey Devyatkov, *An EU-Russia Modus Vivendi in the East?*, Carnegie, 17/01/2018].

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