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Putin's election, same situation in Ukraine

As expected Putin won the presidential elections on March 18 with a large margin of votes, and there should be no expectations that the start of a new Russian political cycle will lead to a change in foreign policy. But Europe will have to think about what to do on the Eastern front, and the next few years will be crucial for the possible membership by Ukraine and Georgia.

The risk is to remake scenarios already seen: deterioration of relations with Russia, which, unwilling to completely lose its former Soviet neighbours, will use the card of the secessionist regions present in these countries. The issue becomes more problematic for every actor by the year: Europe, with conflicts present at the gates of the continent; Russia, for the costs of the bad relations with the West and its neighbours; and of course for the countries exhausted by the difficult internal situation of unresolved conflicts. Also the proposal to establish a UN contingent of peacekeepers in the Donbass regions to promote demilitarisation will not pass all players are not sure to have their own gain.

Moreover the logic behind economic sanctions established by former U.S. president Barack Obama's team remains the same: sanctions should make pay a price to Russia, but not force the Kremlin to take drastic steps that might destabilise global economy and security. This does not mean that sanctions have no effect whatsoever, especially in conjunction with lower energy prices: in the long run, Russia will become weaker, and its government will have access to fewer resources, especially as new technologies transform the global economy. If Russia doesn't change its policies, the situation in the country will only get worse.

In this context we should add that Europe is becoming less than convinced Ukrainian authorities. Few European countries believe that the Petro Poroshenko government is committed to deep structural reforms, and there is not much optimism about the direction of Ukrainian society either. Even worse, this stall in Ukraine will not yet lead the West to ask the Kremlin for help in stabilising the situation. Moscow has already decided that an unstable, divided, and even hostile Ukraine is better for Russia than one slowly drifting toward Europe. Likewise, the European states are still accepting instability in

Ukraine rather than negotiate the country's fate with Putin [Alexander Gabuev, *Nothing to Discuss: Munich Conference Highlights Russia-West Stalemate*, Carnegie, 22/03/2018].

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