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The Russian offensive on constitutional reform in Ukraine

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On 30 March, talks on Ukraine lasting several hours took place in Paris between Sergei Lavrov and John Kerry, the foreign ministers of Russia and the US, which did not yield any concrete results. On 29 and 30 March Lavrov gave two interviews to Russian television channels, in which he once again presented Moscow's demands concerning constitutional reform in Ukraine, saying that he considered the immediate implementation of these measures to be a condition of stability. He noted that the positions of Russia and the United States on resolving the Ukrainian crisis were moving closer, expressing surprise that the EU had "handed over" dialogue with Russia on Ukraine to the US. In turn, on 31 March the Russian Ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, expressed the belief that holding the presidential elections in Ukraine on 25 May without prior constitutional reform could lead to the further destabilisation and division of the country. On the same day President Putin held a telephone conversation with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Minister Lavrov contacted the foreign ministers of Germany and France.

Commentary

- Russia's statements and actions show that – in the face of the failure of current Russian attempts to destabilise south-eastern Ukraine – Russia is treating negotiations with the West as a key instrument for achieving its political goals regarding Ukraine. Moscow seems to believe that, on the one hand, the continuing threat that Russian troops will be sent into 'continental' Ukraine, and on the other, the West's reluctance to escalate sanctions against Russia, will persuade the EU and the US to take Russian demands into account.
- To this end, Russia is strengthening its media and diplomatic offensive in order to develop an agreement within the framework of negotiations with its major Western partners, which among other steps would involve the introduction of constitutional reform in Ukraine, providing for 'federalisation' and declared neutral status. Russia is aiming to ensure that such an agreement is worked out in the coming weeks, and then submitted for approval (without any possibility of negotiations) by the government of Ukraine. This is supposed to happen before the elections on 25 May, and would be the Russian side's condition for recognising their validity, and ceasing its diversionary activities aimed at preventing the elections from being held in south-eastern Ukraine.
- Russia's attitude proves that despite the stated rapprochement in their positions, Moscow is dissatisfied with the US's current position on the crisis, especially the

question of constitutional reform in Ukraine. For this reason, Moscow is also seeking the inclusion of leading EU countries, especially Germany and possibly France, in the negotiating process. Russia is working ultimately to make the existing channels of negotiation with the West on the Ukraine issue into a *de facto* '2+3' format (the government in Kyiv and the south-eastern regions of Ukraine + Russia, the US and the EU). This would allow Russia to impose the idea that the conflict is an internal Ukrainian matter, in which Russia is a mediator, not a party. However, this would require the prior creation of a formal representation of the regions of south-eastern Ukraine.

- The talks about Ukraine's political constitution and status support the image of Russia as the country 'responsible' for Ukraine, and if agreement with the Western countries on this issue is reached on Russia's terms, Moscow will present it as the West's acknowledgment of the Russian sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area, and that Ukraine is its *de facto* protectorate.