

**Question:** The Normandy Format for the settlement of the crisis in Ukraine was established on June 6 four years ago. But is this format operational, considering that the four countries' leaders have not met for nearly two years, and their foreign ministers have not held talks on this issue for the long time either?

**Grigory Karasin:** The Normandy Format is extremely important for promoting a settlement in Ukraine. It was within the Normandy framework that the main arrangements were made for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, including the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements of February 12, 2015, which was approved by the UN Security Council.

The Normandy Format is not just summit meetings or talks at the top or high levels. It also involves the daily work of experts in Russia, Germany, France and Ukraine aimed at finding a solution to the conflict in Donbass and to the internal Ukrainian crisis. This process is ongoing, because the more intensive a dialogue, the less space it leaves for any confrontation.

Overall, we are ready for the next meetings of the Normandy Format, which complements the work of the Minsk Contact Group. The importance of this negotiating format for a Ukrainian settlement has been reaffirmed by the presidents of Russia and France, Vladimir Putin and Emmanuel Macron, during their recent meeting within the framework of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum. The two leaders agreed that the meetings of the Normandy Format leaders must be very well prepared and to be substantive and productive.

**Question:** During their May meeting in Sochi, President Vladimir Putin and Federal Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel discussed work in the quadripartite format and instructed their foreign ministries to consider the possibility of deploying a peacekeeping mission to Ukraine. How far have they moved towards this goal?

**Grigory Karasin:** Russia proposed establishing a UN mission to protect OSCE observers in Donbass back in September 2017. Afterwards, we circulated a draft resolution to this effect at the UN Security Council. Our idea was fully in keeping with the Minsk process, and representatives of Donetsk and Lugansk reacted positively to it.

Regrettably, we have not yet received any written response regarding this project from our European and American partners. Instead, they are talking about an operation to enforce peace and the forcible reintegration of Donbass [with Ukraine] by the UN's Blue Helmets, who would be given broad military and administrative powers, including control of the border. This is proposed against the backdrop of Kiev's statements and plans to hold a "mopping-up" operation in Donbass before launching a political settlement. Overall, our partners' ideas are hardly different from Kiev's plans for regaining control of the border and the territory of Donbass at all costs, without offering any political guarantees to its people.

Despite obvious differences in our approaches to the UN's role in Donbass, we are ready to hold new consultations so that we can find mutually acceptable solutions, provided the opinions of Donetsk and Lugansk are taken into account.

**Question:** Many ideas proposed by the four Normandy format countries have not been implemented, for example, the disengagement of forces near Stanitsa Luganskaya. When will the next prisoner swap take place?

**Grigory Karasin:** This question should be addressed to Ukrainian representatives, who have used numerous pretexts over the past 18 months not to implement the reached agreements. Take the Framework Decision of the Trilateral Contact Group relating to disengagement of forces and hardware, adopted on September 21, 2016. During their Berlin summit in October 2016, the leaders of the Normandy Four reaffirmed the importance of implementing this decision in three pilot areas – Stanitsa Luganskaya, Petrovskoye, and Zolotoye. We can say now that Kiev has stymied the process. The Ukrainian armed forces have not even started the disengagement process in Stanitsa Luganskaya, although the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) has reported approximately 20 times that the conditions for this were met. Moreover, Ukraine has returned its hardware to the region and also created and reinforced positions in Petrovskoye and Zolotoye, where the sides' forces and hardware had been disengaged. The OSCE SMM has confirmed this information in its reports.

As for the exchange of the detained persons, much depends here on Ukraine's readiness to fully comply with the coordinated arrangements. In late December 2017, when more than 300 people were released, Kiev refused at the last minute to deliver over 70 people from the agreed lists to Donbass under far-fetched pretexts. Since then, Donetsk and Lugansk have been trying to secure the release of the people on the list, calling this a condition for resuming discussions on new steps on exchanges. Kiev has consistently refused to release them and has even rejected a compromise "all for all" exchange formula offered by Donbass.

**Question:** Late last year, Russian officers stopped working at the Joint Centre on Control and Coordination (JCCC) on ceasefire in Donbass. On what conditions can they resume their work in the JCCC?

**Grigory Karasin:** Before the withdrawal of Russian military personnel from the JCCC, we repeatedly used various channels to draw Kiev's attention to the importance of creating conditions for our officers' work in the JCCC. The main conditions included safety, respect and unrestricted operation.

Kiev pretended not to hear us. Moreover, several laws were adopted that further hindered the work of Russian officers in the JCCC. They toughened the procedure for entering and staying in Ukraine for Russian citizens and declared Russia an "aggressor." In this situation, we had to make decision to recall our officers from the JCCC.

Responding to requests from our international partners, including the OSCE, we said we would discuss the possibility of returning our officers to the JCCC on the certain conditions: Ukraine must adopt laws to formalise their legal status and security guarantees; the Minsk Contact Group must adopt regulations on the JCCC; and Ukraine must withdraw the request for collecting biometric and personal data from our officers at the border crossing. We also believe that Donbass representatives, who had taken part in the JCCC's work earlier, must resume their work in the Centre.

This would enhance the efficiency of the JCCC whose main task is to promote compliance with the ceasefire arrangements in Donbass.

**Question:** You talked about a pause in contacts between Russia and the United States on Ukraine. Is there any agreement of the timing of possible talks?

**Grigory Karasin:** Our American partners exert a significant influence on the current Ukrainian leaders and for this reason we consider it useful to preserve a channel of cooperation with the US. I would not wish to predict dates for possible contact because such meetings require a serious agenda.

**Question:** Recently Ukraine has replaced its Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) with the Joint Forces Operation (JFO). What is your assessment of the operation?

**Grigory Karasin:** We are concerned about Kiev's actions and the growth of its bellicose rhetoric. After the so-called ATO was rebranded as the JFO on April 30 this year, tensions escalated practically along the entire contact line. The launch of the JFO has actually given the green light to Kiev's implementation of a military scenario because the general command of the military operation in Donbass has been switched from the law-enforcement bodies to the armed forces.

The course of the new operation speaks for itself. There has been a sharp increase in the number of ceasefire violations, shelling of residential areas and, most important, civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. Using the tactic of "crawling assault," the Ukrainian armed forces are advancing in the so-called "grey areas." This is a dangerous escalation of tensions that may trigger a relapse of large-scale military action. It is necessary to avoid this.

**Question:** Experts say there will be no progress at the talks with Ukraine, including on the implementation of the Minsk agreements, until the presidential elections are held. What do you think about this?

**Grigory Karasin:** The Minsk agreements must be carried out regardless of what is happening in Ukraine. Incidentally, the Minsk Package of Measures envisaged the fulfilment of its commitments before the end of 2015.

Obviously, after more than four years of armed conflict, there is very high demand in society for the restoration of peace and civil accord. People should not become hostage to election campaigns or the actions of those who are elected. The Kiev authorities should be ready to start meaningful dialogue with Donetsk and Lugansk. As soon as Kiev understands that the implementation of the Minsk Package of Measures does not amount to surrender by Ukraine but gives it an opportunity to end a protracted crisis, it will be possible to hope for progress in the talks between the conflicting parties. Full-scale implementation of the Minsk agreements is aimed at eventually bringing peace to Ukraine and a normal, calm and decent life to its citizens.