

The Russia-Ukraine Gas Deal Took the World by Surprise. New Detente?

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Few could have predicted several years ago that Russia and Ukraine would reconcile with one another to the point of agreeing to ensure the reliable delivery of gas to the EU for the next 5-15 years, but that's exactly what just happened last week in the most convincing sign yet that the long-awaited "New Detente" is finally beginning to bear some fruit.

Russia and Ukraine took the world by surprise last week after [agreeing to ensure](#) the reliable delivery of gas to the EU for at least the next five years and with the option of extending their accord for a full decade after that. This outcome was previously thought to be a political fantasy after the two countries became acrimonious rivals following the neo-fascist consequences of the US-backed EuroMaidan coup in early 2014 and Crimea's subsequent reunification with Russia shortly thereafter, to say nothing of the presently unresolved Ukrainian Civil War that continues to claim lives in Donbas to this day. It made perfect sense at the time for both parties to disengage from one another and no longer cooperate on the energy front, with Russia instead seeking to diversify its EU-destined transit routes through Nord Stream II and Turkish Stream whereas Ukraine was convinced to buy more expensive American LNG that would be pumped to the country from the West (primarily Poland) through a technique called "reverse gas flow" via existing pipelines.

Both countries made progress on each of these fronts in the years since, which is yet another reason why it was so surprising that they decided to bury the hatchet and agree to prolong their energy cooperation for the benefit of their mutual EU partners. This unexpected development speaks to the enormous achievements that have been made behind the scenes in negotiating the long-awaited "New Detente" since Zelensky's election earlier this year made it easier for Trump to reverse the anti-Russian policies of their predecessors, Poroshenko and Obama respectively. Without changes at the top of the American and Ukrainian leaderships, it would have been impossible for both of them to reach pragmatic agreements with Russia that would ultimately be to their mutual interests. That's not to say that the state of relations between the West (which includes Ukraine's generally pro-Western government in this context) and Russia are perfect, but just that they're comparatively better than at any time since the onset of the West's anti-Russian sanctions in 2014.

Russia and Ukraine engaged in a [prisoner swap](#) earlier in September which was an important trust-building move signifying their joint intent to break the ice and reopen negotiations on other issues of bilateral interest. That development was importantly preceded by President Putin's visit to France to meet with his counterpart a few weeks prior, during which time [it became apparent](#) that a "New Detente" was certainly in the cards. The

subsequent prisoner swap further confirmed that, which was then followed by the [resumption of the Normandy Talks](#) earlier this month. The natural evolution of this fast-moving rapprochement was the surprise gas deal which adds some much-needed substance to this otherwise hitherto mostly symbolic process by making the EU as a whole a tangible stakeholder in its continued success. Furthermore, it's extremely unlikely that this could have occurred had the US not tacitly allowed it, which speaks to its intentions to improve relations with Russia despite the ongoing Ukrainegate impeachment proceedings against President Trump.

Like it was earlier noted, the "New Detente" isn't perfect, as seen most recently by the US' decision to [impose sanctions](#) on the companies involved in Nord Stream II's construction, but once again, the state of relations in general are still comparatively better than their nadir in mid-2014 immediately after the EuroMaidan coup and Crimea's reunification with Russia. The US is still trying to "contain" Russia with mixed success, while Russia is undertaking its best efforts to break out of this "containment" noose and even "flip" some of the US' traditional partners such as Turkey, so the [New Cold War](#) probably won't end anytime soon. Nor, for that matter, did anybody reasonably expect that it would, but just like during the Old Cold War, there comes a time when the involved parties believe that it's in their best interests to proverbially take a break and enter into a period of detente. It seems as though that phase is only now just beginning but which has finally borne some fruit after Trump promised to pursue this outcome all throughout the 2016 campaign.

One can argue over why that hasn't already happened to the extent that he promised (or even if he was fully sincere in the first place), but the point to focus on in the here and now is that some tangible progress has finally been made concerning the future of Russia's trans-Ukrainian gas supplies to the EU. From the looks of it, all the relevant players — Russia, Ukraine, the EU, and the US — have concrete interests in seeing that this agreement is upheld. It's convenient for Russia to continue using existing pipelines, Ukraine wants to get paid for its transit role, the EU desires reliable but cheap gas imports, and the US recognizes that this outcome perpetuates the geostrategic role of its Ukrainian proxy that it could then leverage as a "bargaining chip" for reaching a more substantive "New Detente" with Russia sometime next year or the one afterwards. That said, while each player has their interests, they don't exactly trust one another for different reasons, which means that the "New Detente" might still be offset if any of them decides to play the spoiler or is undermined by their "deep states".

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