

SECURITY CHALLENGES

Minsk
Schminsk

The situation in Ukraine may seem calm. Underneath, it is anything but

Ukraine is still divided: everyday life at Stranitsa Luganskaya Village checkpoint.

BY REINHARD VESER

The daily reports issued by the OSCE Observer Mission in Ukraine testify to a constant stream of ups and downs. Sometimes the number of ceasefire violations increases over the previous day; other times it decreases. There is no definite direction either way – like a barely fluctuating wave that flares up on rare occasions. Today, as the war prepares to enter its fifth year, the political situation surrounding the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is similar to the state of affairs on the battlefield itself: moments of mounting tension alternating with signs of de-escalation. There is, of course, one difference; this wave spiked when Russian President Vladimir Putin requested a UN peacekeeping mission in the Donbass region in September of last year.

For the first time since the Minsk II negotiations in February 2015, a serious proposal came into play that had not been part of the agreement negotiated in the Normandy Format made up of Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia. After a long standstill – marked by occasional disputes about the interpretation of the Minsk document, which was imprecise in many places – Putin's suggestion seemed to open up the possibility, if not for a solution to the conflict, then at least for an improvement to the overall security situation and living conditions of the people in the conflict zone. The suggestion to send in a UN mission was not new; in fact, the only new and surprising element was that the proposal came from Moscow,

which had wanted nothing to do with UN forces up until that point.

Any hopes associated with Putin's UN move have not materialized. Discussions of the mandate for a UN mission have become little more than another pretense for a brand of diplomatic trench warfare between Moscow on one side and the West and Ukraine on the other. The exchange of prisoners between Ukraine and the separatists at the end of December – as well as other potentially positive signals emanating from the region – has failed to have much positive impact.

Of course, the same applies to the developments that may lead to a destabilization or escalation of the conflict. Indeed, there were many such developments in the past several months, such as the overthrow in the "Luhansk People's Republic," the removal of Russian officers from the Russian-Ukrainian Coordina-

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tion Center, the announcement regarding the delivery of American arms to the Ukraine and, at the end of January, the Ukrainian parliament's adoption of a law on the reintegration of occupied territories. However, in spite of everything that has happened in the past several months, there have been no real changes, for better or for worse.

The main reason for this stasis lies in Moscow. The Russian leadership brought the war to Ukraine in 2014, and it is the only party to the conflict that would be able to put a stop to it. And yet, the Kremlin's ongoing military and economic support for the "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk shows that it is eager to keep the conflict alive. For Russia, the de-facto Russian-occupied territories are a means to continue influencing developments in Ukraine; at the moment, they are doing so only indirectly and at the considerable political, economic, social and psychological cost of a devastating war for Ukraine. If elections in Ukraine in 2019 produce results that are even more confusing or have fundamentally different majorities,

the Donbass region might again become a lever for even more direct Russian influence on politics in Kiev.

Then again, the Russian leadership currently has no interest in any form of escalation in Eastern Ukraine. First of all, the Soccer World Cup is set to take place in Russia in June and July, and the success of this event is extremely important to Putin and his associates. Any form of escalation of the situation would cast a dark shadow over this prestigious project – and could even call it into question. Secondly, it is easy to see that as the conflict persists, the EU is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain unity regarding sanctions. Any intensification of the fighting in Ukraine would only serve to close ranks in the EU. Why would the Russian leadership contribute to such a development?

Apart from that, the Ukrainian political sphere continues to come to better terms with the situation in the Donbass region, which in any event they are powerless to change. For President Petro Poroshenko and

the other oligarchs, the ongoing conflict serves as a justification for slowing down or even reversing any judicial reforms that might hinder their power and business interests. At the same time, just like in the old days, this is a war fought in a realm where state coffers meet private pockets; in other words, there is a great deal of profiteering to be done, all of which requires very little effort to drape in the cloak of patriotism. Indeed, the needs of the army can be used to justify considerable expenditures. For the future of Ukraine, this relapse into former patterns now poses a danger that is at least as great as the daily skirmishes on the eastern front.

The fact that both sides have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo does not mean the situation is at all stable. All sides continue to hold to the Minsk II package of February 2015, at least in form; after all, they have nothing else. And yet, it is clear to everyone that things are not working, and nor will they ever as long as the fundamental constellation does not change, that is, as long as Russian interest

in the conflict remains. The only merit of Minsk II – one we should not underestimate – is that it ended open warfare. Since then, however, there has been very little progress in implementing the agreement. Neither the provisions regarding the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front lines nor any of the political items have been complied with in any way.

The greater the degree to which all parties to the conflict see the three-year-old text as a lifeless piece of paper, the greater the danger of a new escalation – even if such an escalation were not intended by the parties. One major risk factor is the business interests and power struggles of the criminal groups who have played a significant role in the "People's Republics" since the beginning. However, even coincidences, misunderstandings and misjudgments can transform a local incident into a major conflagration, especially with the removal of Russian officers from the Russian-Ukrainian Coordination Center, which brought with it the loss of a direct channel of communication. With regard to the number of incidents and the constant stream of daily ups and downs in the Donbass region, there can be no doubt that a great wave of violence could break out again at a moment's notice.

Unlocking the deadlock

The underlying tensions and mistrust at the core of the conflict between Russia and the West

BY STEPHANIE LIECHTENSTEIN

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine is in its fourth year. More than 10,000 people have died so far, and the number of ceasefire violations is on the rise. The humanitarian situation is dire, especially for people living close to the line of contact. The area around the line is polluted with land mines, leading to civilian casualties and making it difficult for farmers to use their land. Moreover, critical infrastructure close to the line of contact has come under fire, cutting off water, electricity and gas and risking ecological disaster.

In addition, one of the few coordination bodies between Ukraine and Russia, known as the Joint Center for Control and Coordination (JCCC), has been rendered all but useless by Moscow's decision in December 2017 to withdraw its officers. This makes it more difficult to reach local ceasefires and is a further impediment to ensuring the safety of the civilian

monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

While the situation remains dangerous, the conflict has largely slipped out of the public eye, as global political leaders have become preoccupied with a series of other challenges.

For the sake of European security and the future of Ukraine, the conflict cannot be allowed to fester. But what can be done?

First, the Minsk Agreements must be implemented fully. They foresee a ceasefire and a series of steps to be taken by Ukraine and Russia to settle the conflict. However, implementation has reached a deadlock as Ukraine and Russia have opposing positions on the sequence of necessary steps. Kiev is requiring a list of security aspects to be implemented before

agreeing to Moscow's political demands for local elections in Donbass and special status for the region. The list includes full implementation of the ceasefire and the withdrawal of foreign troops and weapons. The significant lack of trust between the two sides has discouraged any readiness for compromise.

Second, international diplomatic efforts should be revived. The Normandy Format (Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany) has weakened due to domestic political deadlock in Germany following unresolved parliamentary elections and a seeming reluctance by France to take a more active role.

Third, close coordination between former US Ambassador to NATO Kurt Volker, appointed Special Representative for the

Ukraine Negotiations by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in July 2017, and the Normandy Format is vital. Volker has held several meetings with Vladislav Surkov, Putin's personal adviser on Ukraine. They are currently both working on reconciling different views on a proposal made by President Vladimir Putin for a UN Peacekeeping Mission in Eastern Ukraine.

While the views are still far apart, Volker took up the issue again during his latest meeting with Surkov in Dubai on Jan. 26, 2018, and the idea seems still to be alive. There is hope that under the right circumstances, an armed UN peacekeeping mission could help unblock the impasse with regard to the Minsk Agreements. While this is still a controversial discussion, some experts believe

that such a mission could help create security in Eastern Ukraine, which Kiev has been demanding for some time. This in turn would enable Ukraine to move forward on implementing the political aspects of the Minsk Agreements, such as the holding of the local elections Moscow is asking for.

The UN peacekeeping mission would have to be deployed throughout the entire territory of Donbass – including at the Ukrainian-Russian border – to prevent the continuous flow of arms, military equipment and soldiers. It would also have to serve as more than just a protection force for the civilian monitors of the OSCE. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Eastern Ukraine has been on the ground since the start of the conflict and has established a valuable basis of trust with all sides. Through its daily reporting, the SMM currently provides the only reliable source of information about events on the ground in Eastern Ukraine. It will thus be important to establish close coordi-

ination between the UN mission and the OSCE SMM from the outset. There is hope that with a more secure environment, the OSCE monitors could fully carry out their mandate. As it is now, their mission is often impeded and the monitors are frequently threatened at gunpoint.

Finally, the bigger challenge is to address the underlying tensions and mistrust at the core of the conflict between Russia and the West. Russia considers Ukraine a buffer between NATO and itself and is wary of losing any distance between its own territory and that of the Alliance. This begs the fundamental question of whether the current Euro-Atlantic security architecture meets the security demands of all key players – an issue that must be resolved at some point in the future.

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