

## CHALLENGES



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In the thick of it: The Motherland Monument in Kyiv, Ukraine

IS PEACE  
possible?

UKRAINE

UKRAINE

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Borderland: Ukraine is not at full-blown war – but it's not at peace either



The people of Ukraine remain highly skeptical of all negotiations with Moscow

BY VIKTOR LOSHAK

The war in Donbass has already lasted longer than Russia's involvement in World War II. Seventy-five years ago, the grandfathers of most of those who are still killing each other in Eastern Ukraine today, toiled in trenches nearby. As in every war, the logic of revenge and forgiveness has long since ripped itself away from politics.

We all remember how, a few months ago, the Ukrainian president flew to the front to persuade volunteer groups to comply with the decision of the authorities and leave the front as the withdrawal of troops began. They did not believe him, and one of the most popular volunteers, Masha Zveroboy, spoke about the president and his visit in such a way that she is now under heated criticism in Kyiv for her statements.

A Moscow newspaper has published revelations of a heroine from the other side of the front – a female sniper from Donetsk. She has deliberately killed enemy combatants and would like to kill more. She is about 30 years old, has a husband, two children and a house full of beloved pets. She says that she has never shot at soldiers in Ukraine's armed forces, but only at volunteers. One soldier she wounded deliriously shouted "Mummy!" She emptied a whole cartridge of her sniper rifle into him and does not regret it. War. She will never forget how her husband was shot and seriously injured near the city of Horlivka.

Over the past five years, thousands of people on both sides of the conflict have become professionals in war, which allows them to write everything off. For example, it's noticeable that some of the volunteers fighting on both sides have fled to escape their

debts, as creditors have no hope of finding you on the other side.

Those seeking peace must not only balance the interests of the warring parties and find compromises, they must also overcome human ambitions, traumas and faith in the bullet as the only justice possible.

Now there is a lull in Donbass. In three hot spots, Zolotoy, Pervomaysky and the town of Luhansk, opposing troops are separated by 50 kilometers. At another three hotspots, the separation has been scheduled, but for various reasons is not underway. As usual, the warring factions blame each other. Pensioners are

## Putin insists that giving Kyiv control of the border between Russia and Donbass could unleash a new Srebrenica

taking advantage of the lull; on days when Ukrainian pensions are issued, thousands of elderly people cross the border – that is, the front – in order to queue for hours at ATMs.

It seems that their lives will not become more peaceful just yet. Ukraine would like to change the Minsk Protocol, both in terms of content and scheduling. Thus, Kyiv would like to take control of the border between Donbass and Russia before the elections in the

People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, not after them. Russia is adamant that it is impossible to amend the agreement. Putin refuses to transfer control over the border to Ukraine ahead of schedule. Giving the Ukrainian side control of the border between Russia and Donbass, he argues, could unleash a new Srebrenica – there could be mass killings of the local population by the National Guard of Ukraine. This fear is not altogether groundless. "Strangle the hydra of separatism" is a widely accepted phrase in Ukrainian political discourse.

Germany and France, the other two partners in the Normandy Format, can moderate meetings between the presidents of Russia and Ukraine, but they cannot, and don't even want to, insist on changing the so-called "Steinmeier formula." This proposal envisions Ukraine regaining control of its border with Russia provided that free and fair local elections be held in Russian-occupied Donbass under Ukrainian legislation, which, in turn, would allow the region to receive its self-governing status. As a result, hopes for peace in Eastern Ukraine are again giving way to distrust and confusion.

This is due primarily to overblown expectations of the Paris meeting held at the end of last year. Clearly, there is sympathy for the young Ukrainian president, even among Russians, many of whom are aware of Zelensky's efforts to maintain his election promise and achieve peace in Donbass. This includes his telephone conversations with Putin – during the last year-and-a-half of Poroshenko's reign, the Russian president had refused to talk to Ukraine's president. It also includes the return of Ukrainian ships held in the Kerch Strait.

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BY DMITRI STRATIEVSKI

Ukrainians are weary of war. Seventy percent of them chose peace as their top wish for the new year, despite several other crises facing the country, like poverty and corruption. Such were the results of the most recent survey of its kind at the end of 2019. Much like it was during his successful campaign for president, peace in Ukraine was the centerpiece of Volodymyr Zelensky's new year's address to his fellow citizens.

But what would constitute peace in Ukraine?

Although the Minsk II agreement signed in February 2015 put an end to the bloodiest battles in Donbass and only seldom are sizable tank units and heavy artillery deployed in the area, the war is decidedly not over and continues to claim an immense human and financial toll.

Since 2014, more than 13,000 people have died in the crisis region, including almost 4,000 Ukrainian soldiers, most of whom were young recruits and volunteers. In 2019 alone, almost 100 members of the Ukrainian Army were slain in battle, while survivors have returned home with new cases of physical and psychological trauma.

Furthermore, the monetary burden has been enormous. In 2018, Petro Poroshenko revealed to *La Repubblica* that Ukraine's military commitments in the east of the country cost the government \$5 million each day. The war zone comprises about one-third of Ukraine's peacetime industrial output. Major factories and coal facilities are now in ruins; unemployment in the region has reached 60 percent.

More than one million internally displaced persons have had to abandon their homes due to

military skirmishes, the ravages of war and an overall lack of prospects. It should come as little surprise that the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians place urgent priority on finding a swift end to the military conflict. However, it is not prepared to pay for peace at any price.

What will peace cost?

Any cession of territory to the benefit of another country or long-term territorial loss such as the establishment of a quasi "independent" entity not controlled by Kyiv would be unacceptable to the majority of Ukrainians. A survey from October 2019 revealed that almost three-quarters of those questioned will not even entertain the idea of ceding the territory of the self-proclaimed "republics." That "Donbass will remain Ukrainian" also enjoys political consensus. Even the Russia-friendly parliamentary group Opposition Platform advocates for Ukrainian unity.

Furthermore, the Ukrainian population remains steadfast in its criticism of the idea of issuing a special status within the country for several regions of Eastern Ukraine. Fifty-six percent of those surveyed see Donetsk and Luhansk as part of a unified state under conditions similar to those before 2014. Only 13 percent could accept greater autonomy rights for Donbass.

For the broad spectrum of the political, financial and cultural elite, a special status for the unsettled region would be a nightmare, as it could mean noticeable political influence on the balance of powers and on blocking further ties to the West. A federal ordinance to affix a special status to the region, which a few years ago was still a subject of public debate, is now considered to be on equal terms with separatism.

The Ukrainian people are aware that an end to the war and the reintegration of the – in official jargon – "various districts in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk with special autonomy" requires compromise. But the willingness to broker one is limited. Renouncing a possible future membership in the EU and NATO, recognizing Russian as a second official language, terminating the association agreement with Brussels and granting amnesty to all separatists – are all nonstarters. More than half of those surveyed refuse to work toward this goal while the violence continues.

Is peace possible?

Seventy-two percent of respondents consider the conflict in Donbass to be nothing short of war with Russia. After all, Moscow is backing the autonomy of renegade Ukrainian regions and will not relinquish its hold on this strategic lever of power without a fight. But the majority of Ukrainians fears the expansion of Russia's sphere of influence. It wants to reintegrate Donbass without changing the political status quo across the entire country; Ukraine's policymakers share this desire.

France and Germany, the other two parties of the Normandy Format, are evidently not prepared to ramp up their efforts – a stance that was made patently clear at the group's most recent meeting in Paris. In other words, the guns have little chance of falling silent for any significant period of time in the foreseeable future. Even partial successes such as the latest prisoner swap do little to change this grim truth.

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## MIDDLE EAST

IS PEACE  
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A reconciliation process cannot get underway without the participation of the two parties directly involved

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And there were two exchanges of prisoners, including key figures such as the Luhansk militia officer Volodymyr Tsemakh and the Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov, who had been sentenced to life in a Russian prison. Sentsov expresses little faith in a possible Donbass settlement: "Putin doesn't regard us as a state. For him, we are little more than a rebellious province that the empire should call to order."

Before nationalists staged mass protests, Zelensky had expressed his faith in achieving a breakthrough toward peace at the Paris talks. Not long beforehand, Andriy Yermak, Zelensky's top adviser, spoke of Kyiv's readiness for constitutional reform and the provision of special powers for Donetsk and Luhansk. The problem with this approach, however, is that it would turn the separatist-controlled territories into a state within a state. It's easy to see how other ethnic enclaves – such as Hungarians in Transcarpathia – would react to this. The fact remains that the Minsk Protocol had the support of Kyiv. But creating a territory within the country that is beyond Kyiv's control would have catastrophic consequences for Zelensky's career.

Speaking the night after the talks in Paris, the president expressed views on key political issues that were almost in line with his rival and predecessor Poroshenko: Ukraine will not accept constitutional changes that will lead to a violation of the country's unity, and the government will never negotiate directly with the leaders of the DPR and LPR.

What will happen to Donbass if Russia rigidly supports the "Steinmeier formula," Ukraine insists on changes to the agreement and Europe continues to pressure Moscow with sanctions? The answer to this question remains elusive in the Russian capital because everyone suspects Donbass will gradually become another Transnistria. Just as in Moldova, Eastern Ukrainian authorities will not be able to find a common political denominator. But economically and in terms of everyday life, people will learn to live together.

There are reports that the Ukrainian government is now considering resuming railway links with the districts of Donetsk and Luhansk, regions not controlled by Kyiv. Given its coal-oriented CHP power plans and industry, it's proving difficult for Ukraine to live without coal from Donbass. Yet, despite the ban, there are all sorts of ways to acquire coal.

For example, one Belarusian oligarch has received a large quota for the sale of Russian coal to Ukraine. Whether the coal is from Russia or Donbass is an open question. And finally, the question of the transit of Russian gas through Ukraine has been settled and takes into account the interests of the territories occupied by the separatists.

Geopolitics has played a cruel joke on everyone: on those who were in a hurry to become part of the liberal world; on those who did not want to; and on those who, like in Putin's Russia, tried to prevent it by all means possible. It seems that the new political generation will have to start from a point even more distant and incomprehensible than the Belovezha accords that regulated the end of the USSR.

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BY GISELA DACHS

When Federica Mogherini became the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in November 2014, she was optimistic about the future of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. At the time, she suggested that it might even be possible to reach a two-state solution within her five-year term. Today, Mogherini's successor, Josep Borrell, has taken over the reins at the EU foreign office, and there has been no progress whatsoever on the Israeli-Palestinian front. It is also highly doubtful that President Trump's

no longer categorize West Bank settlements "per se" as illegal. Since then, particularly in radical circles in Israel, demands for the immediate annexation of large areas of land are being expressed in increasingly loud tones. However, in each of these cases – with the exception of some rather adventurous transfer plans – these radical voices have yet to provide an answer to the question of the status of the Palestinian populations residing in these areas. Rabin's basic premise that the Israeli state cannot be simultaneously Jewish, democratic and all-embracing continues to apply to this day. This premise is also ultimately accepted by Israelis who see it as their historical birthright to settle

the security and future of the entire Middle East." In Gantz's opinion, however, the fate of the settlements should be decided by agreements that "meet security requirements and can advance peace." In other words, if Gantz happens to become the next Israeli prime minister, it could mean a change of course in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. Indeed, if he succeeds in forming a more centrist government and relegating right-wing forces such as the Palestinian-American commentator Daoud Kuttab to the sidelines after a decade in power, it wouldn't necessarily deliver an overnight breakthrough, but it might mark the beginning of a brand-new peace process.

And now, just in time for Israel's third election within one year, Washington has re-entered the game with its long-awaited Middle East Peace Plan. As expected, the plan is more strongly in line with the views of the Israeli right than all previous US drafts. The plan also displays Trump's desire to help his friend Netanyahu politically while simultaneously mobilizing American evangelicals for his own re-election in the fall.

Beyond this, however, it remains highly questionable whether this move by Trump can actually achieve a breakthrough. As expected, the Palestinian leadership immediately rejected the plan. At the same time, they also had to



Deal of the century? Palestinian demonstrators during a protest against the Trump administration's proposed Middle East Peace Plan in Gaza City.

recently published Middle East Peace Plan will bring the parties any closer to resolving the conflict.

In fact, the word "peace" is seldom heard these days in the public debates on both sides. For domestic political reasons alone, neither Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who remains in office even after being indicted and is seeking re-election on March 2, nor the 85-year-old Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas, who last received direct legitimization from Palestinians in the West Bank 15 years ago, are in any major way interested in a process of reconciliation.

From today's perspective, the Oslo Accord signed by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chief Yasser Arafat on the lawn of the White House in 1993, belongs to a bygone era. At that time, the hawks in Rabin's camp were convinced they had reached a point where Israel was strong enough to deter its Arab neighbors from plans to wipe it off the map. According to this logic, the historical compromise with the Palestinians would ultimately bring Israel more security and more "normalcy." A lot of water has passed under the proverbial bridge since then. Today, many Israelis have adopted a narrative that is not entirely unjustified, namely that whenever their army withdraws from territories – for example, from Lebanon in 2000 and the Gaza Strip in 2005 – the tendency is for Islamists to then take control in those areas and maneuver into a better position to attack Israel. In this case, however, security concerns also overlap with ideological claims.

This is why the remarks made in November by US Secretary of State Pompeo came at just the right moment for Israelis in the right-wing camp. Pompeo announced that the US would

on biblical soil. In other words, in order to safeguard the Zionist project, they see it as necessary to separate from the Palestinians.

Among those who adhere to this school of thought is Benny Gantz, Netanyahu's challenger from the Blue and White party. Gantz vaguely embraced the "important statement" from the US government, noting that it demonstrated America's firm stance alongside Israel and its "commitment

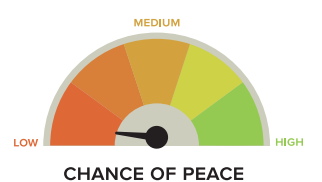
**Just in time for Israel's third election within one year, Washington has re-entered the game with its long-awaited Middle East Peace Plan**

If this were to occur, the next question would be who exactly the Israelis would meet at the negotiating table. The Palestinians are still deeply divided into two political camps. Hamas, an Islamist party, has ruled in the Gaza Strip since 2006, while President Abbas' Fatah party remains in power in the West Bank. New elections have been promised and, this time, all sides have stated at least their theoretical desire to participate. However, both camps are struggling for legitimacy in the eyes of their own populations, and many Palestinians would like to see new forces come to power.

In order to counter growing criticism of the Hamas regime, its leaders will have to do a lot more for the two million people in their charge. It is no longer enough to rally these people – most of whom are barely eking out a living in the Gaza Strip – in hatred of the Zionists. This is the reason why Hamas held back during the last exchange of blows between Israel and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, thereby proving that it is capable of creating and maintaining an atmosphere of calm. A long-term cease-fire between Israel and Hamas under the aegis of Egypt and with the help of UN Special Representative Nikolay Mladenov has been under negotiation ever since. If this succeeds, it could mean at least a few years of rest for Israelis living on the edge of the Gaza Strip – that is, no siren alarms and rocket fire. In return, the population in Gaza would have the opportunity to recover economically and take advantage of increased freedom of movement. This would by no means be the equivalent of peace, if only because Hamas would not be obliged to recognize Israel. At the same time, however, an agreement such as this would enhance Hamas' standing both domestically and internationally.

acknowledge a loss of standing. Since the onset of the Arab uprisings in 2011, many have viewed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as just one of several conflicts in the region. The authors of the US plan are relying on the plan being accepted by those Arab states whose interests coincide with US and Israeli positions regarding Tehran. To date, such voices have been very restrained, if heard at all. Although the number of optimists has declined over the years, such hopeful voices argue that the plan has at least brought the issue back onto the table and that it could lead to the resumption of a peace process. But that will also depend on the results of the elections in Israel and the US. At this point, it would be wise for the Palestinians to take time to reflect on and perhaps even question their past political strategy of categorically rejecting proposals – some of which were better than what lies before them today.

Ultimately, a renewed peace process cannot get underway without the participation of the two parties directly involved. These days, it looks like neither the time nor the region is ripe for that step.



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