

CHALLENGES



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

IS PEACE possible?

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

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

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IS PEACE possible?

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

BY DMITRI STRATIEVSKI

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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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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