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The Ukraine Crisis: Further from a Solution and Closer to Escalation?

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At the end of 2019 there was a glimmer of hope for a breakthrough in the stalemate over Eastern Ukraine. The Normandy Four (Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France) were sitting around the table for the first summit meeting in more than three years. In Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky had been elected president on a peace platform and talked directly to his Russian counterpart. The optimism was short-lived. At the time of writing, in mid-April 2021, the situation looks dramatically different. According to the OSCE the number of ceasefire violations in Eastern Ukraine increased drastically (to 3922 violations from 22 March to 4 April, compared to 1260 the two weeks before). Russian troop movements close to the border created nervousness. This evolution only underlined – more pressingly – what everyone had always known: that the conflict over the Donbas region was all but over and that small sparks could ignite the fire very rapidly.

Since the conflict erupted in 2014 a lot has changed. The Ukrainian army has grown stronger. Kyiv has reinforced ties with Turkey, whose president, Erdogan, has openly declared his support for Ukraine regaining control over its territory. With Biden in the White House, the US has returned to a harsher and less ambivalent policy vis-à-vis Russia and ‘unwavering support’ for Ukraine. Russia has issued passports to a considerable number of inhabitants in the People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. And with a political settlement stalling, calculations about the viability of military options may have changed. All this implies that the conflict holds the potential, if things go wrong, to spill over into a major war.

A solution for the conflict over Ukraine thus seems further off than ever and an escalation into an internationalised conflict cannot be excluded. Further developments will tell, but the potential ignitability of the conflict confronts us again with the need to reflect on structural solutions. Without the latter, new incidents in the future are inevitable and will always hold the potential of spiralling out of control. Any step forward in solving the conflict requires a doubletrack approach. On one hand the situation cannot be deblocked without small steps towards de-escalation on the ground and reversing the logic of competition that has come to determine diplomatic relations between Russia and Ukraine and between Russia and the West. On the other hand, structural issues underlying the conflict require solutions. If they are not tackled, there is a real risk that we

will stumble from incident to incident for many years to come – with the risk of escalation always being present. But structural solutions require a long term vision. Where do we want to end up in say twenty years from now? How do we see relations between Russia and the rest of Europe in the future? What could a post-Cold War order 2.0 look like?

Structures of international governance in Europe have become binary between a Euro-Atlantic community on one side and a fairly isolated Russia, with a number of ‘Eurasian’ partners, on the other side. The integration projects on both sides (the EU’s Eastern Partnership with its Association Agreements and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union) are incompatible and it is exactly their collision that triggered the conflict over Ukraine in late 2013, early 2014. Russia perceives itself to be confronted with an international order that blocks its rise rather than fosters its interests. But it is immersed in doubts. The Ukraine crisis has sparked domestic debates on Russia’s identity, its place in Europe and the need for ‘self-concentration’. But in the West, a vision of where we want to see relations with Russia in the longer term is equally missing. French President Macron was one of the few to call for a profound revision of relations and reconciliation with Russia in his speech to the French ambassadors in 2019. The reactions to his call in several EU capitals also demonstrated how politically sensitive it is even to think about this aloud. Yet, determining a long term objective or aspiration is very much needed. The EU designed a provisional policy for dealing with Russia through its ‘five guidelines’ in 2016. They pragmatically combine two elements: making the restoration of relations dependent on the implementation of the Minsk agreements and selective engagement with Russia when it serves the interests of the EU. Today, this policy has had its time. Substantial progress over the implementation of the Minsk II agreement is unlikely and selective engagement leads to an ambivalent attitude vis-à-vis Russia if it is not underpinned by a long term vision, as the recent visit of the EU’s High Representative Borrell to Moscow demonstrated.

Also the incompatibility of integration projects in the contested neighbourhood between Russia and the EU deserves a long term vision. Even if both projects collided by accident rather than by design, the Ukraine crisis demonstrated that this incompatibility proved to be an important source

of conflict. The challenges are tremendous, as rendering both compatible requires either close cooperation between the EU and Russia (in the form of the old objective of a free trade agreement from 'Lisbon to Vladivostok') or scenarios of shared influence in countries in between.

The long term vision is also desperately needed because the normative framework and common purpose that backed up the architecture of a post-Cold War order have crumbled. Key pillars of this envisaged new order were gradually eroded. The ambition, at the heart of the 1990 Paris Charter for a new Europe, to create a Europe free of dividing lines with indivisibility of security has dwindled. The Ukraine crisis made clear that there is no performative collective security mechanism in wider Europe, able to contain crises. Furthermore, except for the new START treaty, all key arms control treaties, essential to the de-escalation of the Cold War, have collapsed: the INF, CFE, ABM, Open Skies treaties, etc. Finally, the European border regime is under threat and the taboo on the inviolability of borders has been broken.

This doubletrack approach of small steps of de-escalation and trust-building combined with developing a long term vision on solving structural issues is the only sustainable way out of the current conflict. But there is little ground for optimism. Eastern Ukraine is not simply an unresolved issue, but also one that becomes harder to solve as time passes by and positions become more entrenched. Moscow did not annex the Donbas region in 2014, while it could have done so, but this left the question about the finality of its policy open. With political solutions further away than ever, it may make different calculations when it feels pressured. The West, from its side, gets nervous seeing the Russian troop movements today. Even if they may only aim at putting pressure by sending a message about the readiness for military intervention, Brussels and Washington have struggled to find a way to react to Moscow's unexpected moves. Over the last years Russia has often managed to punch above its weight precisely because it acted by surprise and improvisation. In case of a renewed and large scale escalation, the EU is running out of options. It can add more sanctions, but so far they had no effect, except for sending a message to Moscow. The dilemma was formulated succinctly by Federica Mogherini at the beginning of the Ukraine crisis when she asked: 'So let us bomb Russia? What is the solution then?'

At the current stage, it is unlikely that any party would have anything to win from a full scale war, not least in dire economic conditions and amidst a pandemic, so the danger is mainly in the escalation potential. Small moves by one of the many actors can pressure key players to act when they fear a self-set line is being crossed. Russia, from its perspective, cannot let the Donbas region go and may feel compelled to react in case of a Ukrainian offensive. Ukraine, cannot tolerate major new steps in tying Donetsk and Luhansk more closely to the Russian Federation. The West cannot stay aside in case of an escalation without offering Ukraine convincing support. Moreover, the international parameters of the conflict have changed. Russia runs into Turkey, after all still a key NATO ally, over and over again: in Syria, in Libya, over Nagorno-Karabakh. Moscow strikes fragile and difficult deals with Ankara, that often imply considerable concessions. If it were to collide with Turkey over Ukraine, both the stakes and the challenges become entirely different from those in 2014. We have far from reached this point, but the risk is there. After all, also in 2013-2014 the Ukraine crisis started not as a result of a sudden rupture in relations between Russia and the West, but as the result of a long build-up of tensions, triggered into escalation by unexpected and uncontrollable events.