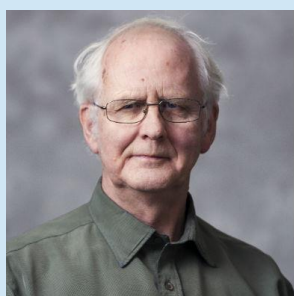


The Long War in Donbas: Causes and Consequences

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Introduction

Following several years of waning Western interest in Ukraine, the rise to power of Volodymyr Zelenskyi's in May 2019 and his attempts to end the war in Donbas have once again focused worldwide attention on the region. This paper first describes Donbas (an abbreviation of Donetskii Bassein) and its people, and the events that led to war – the revolution in Kyiv and Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. It then analyses the course of the war in Donbas, peacemaking efforts and the resulting situation in the separatist areas. The aims of Russia and Ukraine with regard to these areas are analysed, as well as the measures taken to further these aims. Finally, Zelenskyi's peace initiatives and the consequences of the war for all parties are scrutinised.

The paper builds on and summarises the findings of a rich body of research on the conflict, in particular a well-referenced report by Dr Sabine Fischer, head of the Russian studies group at the German Institute of International Policy and Security,¹ and contributions by Deputy Research Director Jakob Hedenskog, a Ukraine specialist at the Swedish Defence

Research Agency (FOI).² These have been supplemented by news reports up to the end of 2019. The paper begins by underlining the significance of the conflict and defining some terms.

The war in Donbas between the Ukrainian state and separatists controlled by Russia has been a continuing conflict since March 2014, making it the longest armed conflict in Europe after the Second World War. Russia, however, considers the conflict to be a civil war and denies its own involvement. According to estimates by the United Nations, over 13 000 people have been killed and about 40 000 injured. Up to 800 000 people are estimated to have fled west further into Ukraine, while around one million have moved to Russia and elsewhere. Together, more refugees and internally displaced persons have been created than were created throughout the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The conflict zone is home to 200 000 people. The frontline stretches over 400 km across the Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk.³ Ukraine has lost one-third of these provinces in the conflict, amounting to 2.8 per cent of its total territory. This is an area inhabited by 3.8 million people, but the majority of both provinces remain in Ukraine.⁴

¹ Sabine Fischer, *Der Donbas-Konflikt. Widerstreitende Narrative und Interessen, schwieriger Friedensprozess*, SWP-Studie 3, February 2019, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin.

² Jakob Hedenskog, *Utvecklingen i EU:s östra närområde*, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), October 2015. I am indebted to Jakob for his useful comments on a draft of this paper.

³ Fischer, pp. 9, 30. Krzysztof Nieczypor, *In the shadow of war: Ukraine's policy towards internally displaced persons*, OSW Commentary, 16 Jan. 2019. Casualty figures are as always contested by warring parties and subject to change.

⁴ Thus it is somewhat misleading to talk about the war in eastern Ukraine. "Easternmost" would be more appropriate.



Donbas and its people

The Donbas region, which comprises the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, accounts for 9 per cent of Ukrainian territory. Its coal mining, steel making and chemical factories made it the most highly urbanised and industrial part of Ukraine. Growing world market competition and a lack of technical development, however, led to regional economic decline. The population fell from 7.4 million (15 per cent of the national total) in 2001 to 6.1 million in 2010 as a result of out-migration and high levels of mortality. Its share of Ukraine's gross domestic product (GDP) decreased from 16.6 per cent in 2011 to 7.1 in 2014, and the region was subsidised by Kyiv. The region was characterised by its high demand for energy and dependence on gas imports from Russia, as well as its environmental problems and many coal mining accidents.

Second only to Crimea, Donbas had the biggest share of people in Ukraine who identified as Russians (38.5 per cent in 2001). Nonetheless, the majority still regarded themselves as Ukrainians. The latter also spoke Russian and mixed with Russians. A regional identity had developed, with a lingering Soviet mentality and a mixed language, *surzhyk*. In contrast to other Ukrainians, few people travelled to Western Europe and many travelled to Russia for work. An increasing number of people in Donetsk, the major city of about one million inhabitants, identified as Ukrainians (42.7 per cent) in the 1990s.

Even after Viktor Yanukovich, the leader of the Party of Regions who had been President of Ukraine since 2010, was toppled by the EuroMaidan revolution in February 2014, a major opinion poll in April showed that only 27.5 per cent of people in Donetsk and 30.3 per cent in Luhansk supported separatism and union with



Russia, and only 30 percent in Donetsk regarded Yanukovich as still the legitimate president.⁵ People were more motivated by local concerns than by language and pro-Russian foreign policy issues.⁶ However, mistrust of the Western-oriented leadership in Kyiv had been growing since the 2000s, promoted by the Party of Regions. Under the influence of Russian propaganda, many people reacted against the tumultuous EuroMaidan revolution and supported, or at least tolerated, the separatist leaders. Those who opposed them fled to the west of Ukraine.⁷

Revolution in Kyiv and the Russian response

Throughout 2013, Russia had put increasing pressure on Yanukovich to agree to Ukraine joining a Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, for instance by imposing a de facto trade blockade and threatening to stop gas exports during the coming winter. As a result, in late November Yanukovich refused to sign a long agreed Association Agreement with the European Union (EU). Instead, in December he made a deal with Russia, in which Russia agreed to fund US\$ 15 billion of Ukrainian debt and reduce its gas price, thereby making Ukraine more dependent on it.⁸

This led to huge demonstrations, which attracted hundreds of thousands, on Maidan Square in Kyiv in favour of the EU and against Yanukovich and his leadership. The protests were met by growing police violence and early casualties. In the period 18–20 February 2014, around 100

protesters were killed by snipers – believed to be from the Ukrainian special police forces (Berkut), apparently supported by advisers from Russia. When an agreement with the opposition parties, sponsored by Western leaders, was rejected by the Maidan crowds, President Yanukovich fled Kyiv. He was removed from office by parliament (Verkhovna Rada) on 22 February and replaced by an interim president. A new government dominated by liberal parties was formed, the association agreement with the EU was quickly signed and a new president, Petro Poroshenko, was elected in May 2014.⁹

Russia's first response to the Maidan revolution came in Crimea, where ethnic Russians dominate. In February, the State Duma authorised the use of military force to protect compatriots in Ukraine. After the invasion of Crimea had already begun, the possibility of including foreign territory in Russia on the basis of a referendum was also authorised. Large-scale military exercises were held near Ukraine. Following days of pro-Russia demonstrations in Crimea, as well as protests against the new leadership in Kyiv, on 26–27 February military units from the Russian Black Sea Fleet bases on the peninsula, operating without insignia, and special forces and volunteers flown in from Russia took over the Crimean Parliament, other official buildings and the airport. The military disarmed the Ukrainian military forces, which offered no resistance,

⁵ Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis; What it means for the West*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2014, pp. 121 f. See also Serhii Kudelia, "The Donbas Rift", *Russian Politics and Law*, vol. 54, no 1, 2016, pp.11 12, www.academia.edu/27106129/The_Donbas_Rift?auto=download.

⁶ Elise Giuliani, "Who supported separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and popular opinion at the start of the

Ukraine conflict", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2018, pp.1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X2018.1447769>

⁷ Hedenskog, p. 35.

⁸ Hedenskog, pp. 79 f; Marek Menkiszak, *The Russian-Ukrainian war and European Security*, Nordika programme, Note no. 19, 2014, p. 2.

⁹ Wilson, pp. 86 ff; Anna-Lena Laurén, Peter Lodenius, *Ukraina: gränslandet*, Atlantis, Helsingfors 2015, pp. 5 ff.



and quickly occupied the entire peninsula.¹⁰ The official Russian justification was that what it described as a “fascist coup” in Kyiv threatened the lives of Russians in Crimea, and that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was intending to take over the Russian bases. The new leaders in the Crimean Parliament announced a referendum on independence and unification with Russia, to be held on 16 March. At gunpoint and in the absence of legitimate foreign observers, the proposal in the referendum was allegedly backed by 96.7 per cent of voters on a turnout of 83 per cent. Such figures lack credibility, since 37 per cent of the population was either Ukrainian or Tatar. Three days later, the Russian State Duma agreed to the accession of Crimea and Sevastopol as constituent parts of the Russian Federation.¹¹ This was a blatant violation of the principles of territorial integrity and non-violence enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the Charter of the United Nations and bilateral treaties between Russia and Ukraine. It was condemned by NATO and the EU, which imposed sanctions on Russia.

Russia’s military forces in Crimea have since been strengthened so that they now dominate the Black Sea. Russia has also suppressed all political opposition, especially from the indigenous Crimean Tatars, and moved to integrate the peninsula socially and economically.

As a consequence of events in Crimea, Russia gained control of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait between Crimea and the Russian mainland. This inner part of the Black Sea is important for connections with Donbas and the busy adjoining river and canal systems in both Ukraine and Russia.

¹⁰ Roger McDermott, *Brothers Disunited: Russia’s Use of Military Power in Ukraine*, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth 8 April 2015, USA, pp. 9 ff; <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/197162>; Michail Zygar,

Since the Sea of Azov was divided in 1991, Ukraine had controlled the Strait because the shipping lane had been dredged closer to Crimea. Russian ships had to pay a toll for every passage. A military confrontation had nearly occurred in 2003, when Russia claimed the small island of Tuzla in the Strait and began to build a dam to it, leading to strong Ukrainian protests. A border agreement was reached, according to which the Sea of Azov became the internal waters of both states and thus closed to third countries, and Russia would no longer have to pay toll.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 meant that Russia prolonged its own coastline on the Sea, and gained a dominant share of its waters and full control of the Kerch Strait. In order to connect the peninsula with Russia and counteract Ukraine’s rupture of economic links, Russia built a road and a railway bridge across the Kerch Strait, which opened in 2018 and 2019, respectively. Despite Ukrainian protests and in violation of international maritime law, its span was made so low that one-third of Ukrainian freighters are no longer able to pass in or out of the Sea of Azov.

Furthermore, once the conflict in Donbas began, Russia and Ukraine reinforced their naval forces in the Sea of Azov by transferring ships from the Caspian Sea and Odesa, respectively, and creating new naval bases there. The Donetsk separatists also formed a flotilla in the Sea. When Ukraine seized a fishing boat from Crimea in March 2018, Russia detained two Ukrainian fishing boats and instituted inspections of Ukrainian merchant ships, causing long delays and imposing great costs on Ukrainian shipping.¹² In addition, Ukrainian naval forces were

Männern i Kreml. Inifrån Putins hov, Ordfront, Stockholm 2018, pp. 378-384.

¹¹ Wilson, pp. 110 ff, Laurén and Lodenius, pp. 78 ff.

¹² As an alternative, Ukraine has recently improved the highway from Mariupol to the airport at Zaporizhia. Bohdan Nahaylo, “Bitter harvest” Atlantic Council, 11



forced to ask for permission to pass the Strait.¹³ On 25 November 2018, Russian border troops attacked three Ukrainian naval ships attempting to enter the Sea of Azov, boarded the ships and put the crews on trial, accusing them of violating the Russian border. Ukraine proclaimed martial law in adjacent regions. Western powers, including Sweden, condemned the incident, but to no avail.¹⁴ These events are all to some extent connected with the war in Donbas. They impose high economic costs on Ukraine, since alternative transport by land is more expensive and would be costly to expand.

The course of the war in Donbas

Soon after Crimea was annexed in March 2014, pro-Russian groups staged demonstrations and takeovers of official buildings all over Ukraine, especially in areas with a high representation of Russian speakers. These attacks were clearly coordinated and supported by Russia. In April 2014, President Putin talked about the historic region of Novorossia, which comprises Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, Mykolaiv and Odesa, indicating an ambition to cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea and create a land corridor to Moldova, where Russia has backed the separatist “republic of Transnistria” since 1991. Apart from those in Donetsk and Luhansk, all these attempted takeovers failed, although a fire in Odesa led to the deaths of 42 people. The Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People’s republic (LPR) were proclaimed in

April 2014, and referendums on independence on the Crimean model were held and won on 11 May. A Union of People’s Republics, Novorossia, was promulgated soon after, but infighting and waning enthusiasm in Moscow meant that the idea lost its traction.

As the separatists extended their power in the Donbas region, they took control of weapon arsenals and personnel, as well as border posts and airports. The separatist fighters were made up of local radical Russian nationalists, militia units, members of organised criminal groups, defectors from the Ukrainian Berkut police and secret services, members of oligarchic security services and, curiously, members of the so-called Russian Orthodox Army. They were joined by volunteers from the Caucasus, especially Chechnya and Central Asia, Cossack formations, militias from Crimea as well as volunteers from European states such as Serbia. From the beginning, “political advisers” and retired officers of the GRU and FSB Russian secret services, such as Igor “Strelkov” Girkin, played a leading role.¹⁵ Russia initially paid the volunteers higher salaries than soldiers at home while denying that it was involving regular Russian soldiers, and at most admitting that there were volunteers and soldiers on leave in Donbas. Furthermore, Russia intervened using information warfare, subversion, and political and economic pressure, as well as mass propaganda through state television, news and social media. Together, this was later labelled “hybrid warfare”.¹⁶

Nov. 2019, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/bitter-harvest.

¹³ Ritvan Bari Urcosta, *Russia’s Strategic Considerations on the Sea of Azov*, Warsaw Institute Special Report, 12 March 2018, pp. 3-43; UNIAN info “MFA Ukraine admits new territorial dispute with Russia could arise”, <https://unian.info/politics/10317417>. Wilson, p. 113.

¹⁴ Andrei Riskin, “Rossiia popala v lovushku v raione Krymskogo mosta”, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 26 November

2018, Anna-Lena Laurén, “Krisen i sundet kan leda till väpnad konflikt”, *Dagens nyheter*, 27 November 2018; Fischer, pp 10–11.

¹⁵ Zygur, pp. 392 ff. Some of the fighters joined private Russian military companies, which were later sent to carry out missions in for example Syria, the Central African Republic and Libya, thereby granting Russia some deniability.

¹⁶ Menkiszak, p, 3, Sergey Sukhankin, “Unleashing the PMCs and irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas,



Ukraine was totally unprepared to cope with this aggression. Partly due to its economic problems, the defence sector had been neglected for decades. Hardly any military exercises had been held since 1991. The defence minister stated in March 2014 that only 6000 soldiers were combat ready. Most of its forces were stationed in western Ukraine, facing NATO as in Soviet times, while its weaponry was outdated and some had even been sold off. Soon, however, Ukraine managed to scrape together a motley force of regular soldiers, police and security service forces, volunteer units such as the Azov Battalion, fighters from the nationalist Right Sector and foreign volunteers.

When in mid-April separatists under Girkin's command seized the town of Sloviansk in the north of the Donetsk region, Ukraine launched its Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO), thereby starting a war of defence. After initial setbacks in April and May, Ukrainian ground forces with the help of aircraft and helicopters took control of most of the provinces, including Mariupol and Sloviansk, closing in on Donetsk and Luhansk in August.

In response, while holding huge military exercises around Ukraine, Russia shelled Ukrainian territory and transferred more heavy weapons, such as armoured personnel carriers (APCs), tanks and rocket launchers, across the open border. Several Ukrainian aircraft were shot down. On 17 July, a Malaysian passenger jet was shot down over separatist-held territory, killing the 298 people on board. This caused an international outcry and led Western nations to sharpen sanctions on Russia. Russia denied involvement and blamed Ukraine.¹⁷ International investigations, however, proved beyond doubt that the aircraft had been attacked by an advanced

surface-to-air missile, the launcher of which had come from and returned to Russia. Ukraine did not have such a weapon in the area, since the separatists had no aircraft to be shot down.

As the separatists seemed to be facing defeat in late August, Russia sent in a few thousand regular troops with heavy weapons, and "humanitarian convoys" with hundreds of trucks started to cross the open border from Russia.¹⁸ Ukrainian forces suffered heavy losses at Ilovaisk east of Donetsk, and troops from Russia advanced south, coming within a few kilometres of Mariupol on the Sea of Azov, where two Ukrainian patrol boats were sunk. When 10 Russian paratroopers were captured deep behind the frontline, Russia's Defence Ministry explained that they had entered Ukraine "by mistake during an exercise".

Under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Ukraine, Russia and the self-declared separatist republics concluded an agreement in Minsk on 5 September on a ceasefire, the withdrawal of troops and a prisoner exchange (see below).

However, Russian convoys with heavy weapons, escorted by soldiers in green uniforms without insignia, continued to flow into separatist territory. The fighting continued, ending with a Ukrainian defeat in a battle over the Donetsk airport in January 2015. Backed by Germany and France, a new package of measures to stop the war (Minsk II) was signed on 12 February 2015, after which the fighting abated, except that the separatists conquered Debaltseve, an important railway town, before the ceasefire took full effect. The war then continued at a lower level, especially after Russia started its military intervention in the Syrian civil war in September 2015, but

War by other means" Jamestown Foundation, 3 September 2019, <https://jamestown.org>, pp. 5–11.

¹⁷ Zygar, p. 396.

¹⁸ Fischer, p. 25; Wilson, p. 142.



shooting has flared up and ceasefires have been regularly broken since then. OSCE observers have been captured and denied access to many areas, especially by the separatist “authorities” and by Russia, and their drones have been shot down.¹⁹

A British Institute has claimed that 9 000–12 000 Russian citizens had participated in the war as of early 2015, while a separatist leader mentioned a figure of 50 000 in July that year. As of February 2018, the strength of the separatist force was estimated at around 31 000, of which 80 per cent were Donbas residents, 15 per cent (25 000) military contractors from Russia and other states, and 3 per cent (900–1000) Russian regular troops. The proportion of locals had gradually increased as salaries became more attractive to them and less so to Russian soldiers.²⁰ The number of Russian casualties was estimated at 1500 in April 2017, but there have been no official figures and the publication of such figures is forbidden.²¹

Peacemaking efforts

In March 2014, right at the beginning of the conflict, the OSCE decided to send a Special Monitoring Mission (SSM) to Ukraine. This unarmed civilian mission was tasked with gathering information on the security situation on the ground, making regular reports on specific incidents, documenting political developments and the human rights situation in the whole of Ukraine and ultimately reducing tensions and promoting dialogue between all sides. In preference to the suggested alternative, which was an EU mission, Russia accepted the mission’s deployment but used its veto to restrict the

size and geographical scope of the mission and its management. An additional OSCE observer mission was deployed to two Russian border checkpoints. A lack of military expertise in the SSM, however, reduced its ability to enforce ceasefires and withdrawals.²² Perhaps in order to remedy this situation, the SSM was supplemented by a Joint Centre for Control and Coordination, a contact group made up of Ukrainian and Russian officers. In December 2017, however, Russia left the group, in a move that could be interpreted as an attempt to force Ukraine to deal directly with the separatists. In June 2014, moreover, the OSCE organised a Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) with representatives from Ukraine, Russia and the DPR/DPR, which holds regular meetings. Russia thus has three voices against one in this forum.²³

The Normandy Group, which was formed in June 2014 at a meeting of the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany to mark the 70th anniversary of the Normandy landings, is perhaps the key group. At a summit meeting with the leaders of these states in Minsk in February 2015, representatives of the Trilateral Group signed the Minsk II agreement. Minsk II fleshed out the Minsk I agreement by stipulating an immediate ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons by both sides an equal distance from the frontline and the creation of a security zone of at least 50 km straddling the frontline, all three of which would be monitored by the OSCE. In addition, a dialogue on local elections under Ukrainian law and a temporary Ukrainian order of local self-governance (see below) in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces

¹⁹ Hanna Shelest and Dmytro Sulga, “Minsk agreements implementation: Art of impossible?” *Ukraine Analytica*, 1 (3) 2016, pp. 9–12.

²⁰ Igor Sutiagin, RUSI Briefing Paper, “Russian forces in Ukraine”, 26 April 2015, http://www.rusi.org/download/assets/201503/BP_Russian_Forces_in_Ukraine; Igor Siv, “50 000 Russian citizens fought in Donbass war: separatist leader”,

Euromaidan Press, 30 July 2016, <http://Euromaidanpress.com/2016/07/30/96047> and <http://Ukrainianweek.com/Politics/2098029>

²¹ Fischer, p. 9; McDermott, pp. 33–35.

²² Johan Engvall, *OSCE and Military Confidence-Building in Conflicts: Lessons from Georgia and Ukraine*, FOI-R-4750-SE, March 2019, pp. 40–43.

²³ Hedenskog, p. 31.



would start on day one after the pull out, all hostages and illegally held persons were to be released within five days of the troop withdrawal and a Ukrainian amnesty law should be passed. Humanitarian aid was to be provided, and Ukraine was to prepare modalities for restoring social and economic transfers, including pensions and local government funding. Control of the state border was to be restored to Ukraine in the entire conflict zone, starting on the first day after local elections had been held under OSCE supervision, and ending by 2015 on condition that the constitutional reform had taken effect. All foreign armed formations, including mercenaries and military equipment, were to be pulled out, and mercenaries and illegal groups were to be disarmed.²⁴ In September 2015, the TCG agreed on the withdrawal of heavy tanks and artillery a distance of 15 km, which was put into effect. One year later, troop separation of 1 km was agreed in three places along the conflict line, but this was only partially fulfilled.²⁵

In order to implement the agreements, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted an amnesty law for war participants in September 2014, but made an exception for terrorist acts. The law did not take effect, however, nor did the exchange of hostages, including journalists. In October 2014 a law on special status for parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces for three years, including the right to use the Russian language and special rights in administration, policing and elections was passed, but the Ukrainian government stated that this could only be implemented after free and fair elections according to Ukrainian law. This law was included in draft constitutional amendments on decentralisation in all of Ukraine, a reform that was also a stated priority in the EU Association Agreement.²⁶ Despite internal

protests, the law on special status was prolonged in October 2018. Ukraine also integrated its irregular volunteer units into the army and the National Guard, and the counterterrorism operation was declared over.

By contrast, the agreements did not place any obligations on Russia, because it did not consider itself to be a party to the conflict. Even the “withdrawal of all foreign armed formations and military equipment” did not directly refer to Russian troops or volunteers. A key problem for implementation was therefore the sequencing of political and military measures. Ukraine did not want to fulfil the political obligations until the military conditions were met, whereas Russia and the separatists wanted parallel implementation. Other problems concerned how to hold elections, the future status of the regions inside Ukraine and the timing of Ukraine regaining full control of its border with Russia.

In order to break the deadlock, in October 2016 the German Foreign Minister and OSCE chairman, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, proposed a formula by which local elections would be held under Ukrainian legislation and OSCE supervision. If the OSCE found them free and fair, a preliminary law on special status would be implemented and Ukraine would get control of its eastern border with Russia. The Normandy Group decided to work out a roadmap on implementation. However, the formula was endorsed by the Russia, France and Germany, but not by Ukraine, the problem being whether free elections could be held while the separatist regimes and the Russian-led organisations were still in place and the border with Russia still open. In practice, the elections would be held at the

²⁴ “Full text of the Minsk agreement”, *Financial Times*, 12 February 2015.

²⁵ Fischer, p. 13; Shelest and Shulga, pp. 11–12.

²⁶ Shelest and Shulga, pp. 12–16, 20; Fischer, pp. 22–23.



“barrel of a gun” and be won by the separatists, and the presence of international observers would serve to legitimise the election results.²⁷

In the end the Steinmeier formula was put on ice, no roadmap was worked out and the Normandy Group did not meet for a few years. In September 2017, President Putin took the initiative to propose a UN peacekeeping mission along the conflict line, but this was not met with a positive response. Ukraine had already proposed a UN force with access to the whole of the contested area and the Russian-Ukrainian border in 2015. Some progress was made in the TCG on economic and humanitarian issues, but positions were locked with regard to politics and security. Ukraine and Russia consented to handle such issues in the Normandy format without the separatists, but Russia insisted on allowing the separatists to confirm the decisions through the TCG. In this way, it maintained its power over security issues and forced others to accept the separatists as a negotiation partner.²⁸ The reasons for the failure to achieve peace stem from deep-seated conflicts of interests and ambition. These are addressed in a chapter below.

Developments in the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s republics

Initially, the political situation in the separatist republics was characterised by chaos and power struggles, and actors from Russia played a dominant role. However, by the summer of 2014 radical Russian leaders, such as Girkin who wanted to conquer all of Ukraine, had been sent home, arrested

or killed, to be replaced by locals and people from Ukraine who more or less accepted the Minsk accords and orders from the Kremlin. In Luhansk, Igor Plotnitskii, a businessman from Ukraine, was made “president”. He fled to Russia in late 2017, however, following a palace coup to be succeeded by Leonid Pasechnik, a former security officer in Ukraine and later a security minister in Luhansk.

In Donetsk, Aleksandr Zakharchenko, a former businessman turned military officer, became president in August 2014 but was killed by a bomb in August 2018. He was noted for proposing a merger of the two republics into a state to be known as Novorossiiia in July 2017 – longer after Russia had abandoned the idea. Zakharchenko was succeeded by Denis Pushilin, the only one to have any previous political experience. He is on record as saying that the republics would like to join Russia.²⁹

When the republics were proclaimed in May 2014, they each adopted a constitution, set up government organs and a judiciary and held elections. Both Pasechnik and Pushilin were re-elected in November 2018. The systems were in no way democratic, however, as both “parliaments” were dominated by their leading figures and conflicts were often resolved informally or violently. Just like the declarations of independence, the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2018 were held in the absence of legitimate observers and contrary to the Minsk Accords.³⁰ Likewise, the judiciary and the mass media are under political control and filled with Russian propaganda. Critical

²⁷ Hedenskog, p. 31; Fischer, p. 13; and Vladimir Socor, “Steinmeier’s formula: Its background and development”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 24 September 2019, www.jamestown.org/edm/archive

²⁸ Fischer, pp. 13–14.

²⁹ “DNR” ta “LNR” peredumali i vyznali Krym rossiiskim” *BBC Ukrainian Service*, 10 June 2015,

www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2015/06/1506_dnr_lnr_crimea_vc

³⁰ Anton Shekhovtsov, “Foreign observation of the illegitimate ‘general elections’”, *European Platform for Democratic elections*, 13 Nov. 2018.



journalists face repression. The security organs are staffed with war veterans and people who only want to make a living, and many cases of arbitrary detention, disappearances and torture have been reported. The result, according to witness accounts, is that people react with political apathy and have withdrawn into private life.³¹

The war inevitably resulted in a deep economic crisis in and growing dependence on Russia in Donbas. Many industries and parts of the infrastructure were damaged or plundered, trade patterns were broken and the banking system collapsed. According to Western estimates, productivity fell by two-thirds in 2014. When at the end of the year Ukraine ceased payment of pensions and social benefits to people in the occupied regions unless they collected them in Ukraine, many became reliant on intermittent payments of salaries from the few remaining large enterprises. The companies owned by Rinat Akhmetov, which employed 120 000 people, were expropriated in 2017. Akhmetov supported the integrity of Ukraine and had refused to pay taxes to the separatists.³² Instead, Russia started to pay pensions, benefits and salaries. In 2016, its contributions were estimated at US\$ 1 billion a year, covering 70–90 per cent of the budgets of the DPR and the LPR. Most enterprises were still registered in Ukraine and some were allowed to trade across the frontline for a time, for instance to import coal, and Ukraine still provided electricity. When in March 2017 Ukraine suddenly imposed an economic blockade on the separatist republics, however, industrial production

was brought to a standstill and many people lost their jobs.

The situation had a disastrous impact on social conditions. Many young or skilled people emigrated or fled the war either to the rest of Ukraine or to Russia, where they easily blend in and find jobs. About one-third of the people in need of humanitarian assistance are of pension age. After Ukraine stopped paying social benefits across the frontline in 2015, it imposed compulsory registration in Ukraine for pensioners living east of the frontline as internally displaced persons (IDPs). They must periodically physically attend a designated branch of a bank and if they are not found at their place of registration, they can lose their pension. This happened to half a million people in 2016. Nonetheless, half a million of the 1.3 million people received pensions from Ukraine in 2017, albeit for meagre amounts. The nutrition situation has deteriorated. In the republics, the proportion of the population without access to proper food increased from 40 per cent to 86 per cent between 2016 and 2017. Growing poverty has been accompanied by rising levels of drug abuse, alcoholism and prostitution. The provision of medical care and schooling has been reduced, not least in urban areas.³³ In 2015, five frontline crossing stations were established, four for cars and trucks and one, at Stanytsia Luhanska, just for pedestrians. The separatist side had little interest in facilitating safe passage, partly out of fear that valuable people would not return. The number of passages grew steadily, reaching 1.2 million in June 2018.³⁴ This totally overburdened the infrastructure, resulting in long waits under little protection. Some people crossed the

³¹ Fischer, pp. 17–18, 29.

³² Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest "oligarch" had earlier supported Yanukovich and financed the building of a brand new football stadium in Donetsk, but this was destroyed in the war, and Akhmetov moved his prominent football club, Shakhtar Donetsk, to Kiev. (Zygar, p. 391)

³³ Fischer, p. 30; Nieczypor, pp. 1–7.

³⁴ UN OCHA, *Ukraine checkpoints: Humanitarian Snapshot*, 16 July 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-checkpoints>.



frontline in other places, exposing themselves to mines and unexploded munitions. The frontline zone is said to be one of the most mined in the world.³⁵

Life on both sides of the frontline is especially hard, as evidenced in many reports and films.³⁶ Sporadic fighting and shooting continue to harm and traumatise people, prevent repairs and disrupt infrastructure, most notably the networks for electricity, water and district heating. The Donetsk purification plant, which provides drinking water to 345 000 people on both sides of the frontline, is a case in point.

Furthermore, the access of international aid organisations to the separatist regions has been reduced, since they must be accredited by the authorities and are often seen as Western agents. The UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross are admitted, probably because Russia is a member and supports them, but they are still exposed to arbitrary controls. Local aid networks work under strict political conditions. Rinat Akhmetov set up a project in 2014 to deliver food and children's parcels to Donbas on a grand scale, but it was closed down at the same time as his enterprises. The Russian Emergency Ministry has sent a number of humanitarian convoys, but to what extent they were carrying civilian aid rather than military supplies cannot be ascertained as Russia has not permitted outside inspections. The same is true of private aid from Russia.

The EU and its member states have also allocated huge sums for aid and reconstruction, and are among the largest donors. The flow has diminished, however,

due to the problems noted above and the fact that international attention on the needs in Donbas has been overshadowed in recent years by the wars in the Middle East and natural disasters in Africa and Asia.³⁷

Russian policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and Donbas

Russian policy on Ukraine, as sketched above, is a reflection of its ambition to remain a great power. The post-Soviet states are viewed as belonging to its exclusive strategic sphere of influence, where pro-Russian regimes are to be supported or installed. Spurred by the rising tide of Russian nationalism, Russia has – in violation of international law – taken on itself the right to protect Russian compatriots abroad, most of whom live in adjoining states, by any means necessary.

Russia does not recognise Ukraine as a totally independent state entitled to choose its own foreign policy orientation. Instead, it is viewed as a failed, split state under Western influence. The democratic power shift in Kyiv was seen as directed by the USA, as a “colour revolution” that posed a direct threat to stability in Russia. Russia claimed that Ukraine was ruled by nationalists, neo-Nazis and anti-Semites, even though this was thoroughly disproved by the free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2019. The annexation of Crimea was therefore an act of “self-defence” to stop NATO and safeguard the Russians living there, despite the fact that they dominated the peninsula. Russia considers the incorporation to be irreversible and rejects any negotiation on the issue.³⁸

³⁵ Fischer, pp. 30 f.

³⁶ See e.g. Anna-Lena Laurén, “Här grävs nya skyttegravar i väntan på fred”, *Dagens nyheter*, 7 December 2019, pp 21-23; and Simon Lereng Wilmont's film *The distant barking of dogs*.

<https://www.pbs.org/pov/watch/distantbarkingofdogs/>

³⁷ Fischer, pp. 30–33.

³⁸ Ingmar Oldberg, “Is Russia a status quo state?”, *UI Paper*, no 1, 2016, pp. 1–4.



By contrast, the Donetsk/Lugansk republics have been neither incorporated like Crimea nor recognised by Russia as states, as South Ossetia and Abkhazia were following a short war with Georgia in 2008. Russia instead uses them as bargaining chips and levers in the Minsk process, in a similar way as it supports the separatist region of Transnistria against the central government in Moldova. Faced with Ukrainian resistance in Donbas and the Western reaction, Russia seems to have given up its most far-reaching ambition of conquering all of Ukraine, as well as the idea of truncating Ukraine by the creating a Novorossia. It now seems to be content with the status quo on the basis of the Minsk accords. The declared ambition instead is to force Ukraine to change its constitution to allow federalism in order to give more influence to the pro-Russian regions over language rights and foreign policy on Russia, but first and foremost to keep Ukraine out of NATO and the EU. The LPR is similarly demanding a quota in the Ukrainian Rada, close economic ties with Russia and a right of veto on foreign policy.³⁹

As noted above, Russia officially claims that it is not involved in the war, which it regards as a civil war. Nonetheless, it “respects” and “sympathises with” the separatists, and supports them in every possible way. It has provided indispensable military assistance and sent many “civilian advisers” to help build state-like structures. Partly in order to counter the isolation of the inhabitants from Ukraine and facilitate contacts with Russia, in February 2017 Russia decided “temporarily” to recognise their identity cards, passports and various certificates as valid, and to allow free travel into Russia. Claiming that this was in accordance with the Minsk accords, Russia thereby recognised the authorities, as legal. Still, Russia refrained from issuing automatic Russian passports and citizenship, even though many had acquired these already.

³⁹ Shelest and Shulga, p. 20.

Economically, the self-proclaimed republics, especially the LPR, have become totally dependent on Russian humanitarian aid and trade since Ukraine imposed its blockade in 2017. However, regular trade is also hampered for as long as Russia does not recognise the republics. In order to avoid Western sanctions and stay legal, some Russian companies are routing financial transactions with them through South Ossetia – the only “state” to have recognised the republics, but which itself is not recognised by the international community.⁴⁰ Russian influence and responsibility for the survival of the separatist regions is thus being steadily augmented.

Ukrainian policy regarding Russia and the separatists

The Ukrainian government under President Petro Poroshenko – a wealthy businessman – saw the country as part of the West, and itself as a defender of liberal democratic values whose first foreign policy priorities were to join NATO and the EU. Faced with Russian military superiority, Ukraine was grudgingly forced to accept the Minsk accords, which despite Western mediation were clearly in Russia’s favour. Nonetheless, Kyiv was unwilling to give up Crimea, and it strove to fully restore Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity in both cases. The war in Donbas was mainly fought against Russia, which was seen as pulling all the strings.

The separatist leaders were consequently deemed to be acting not in the local interest but as traitors, criminals and terrorists, and the Donbas population was seen as backward, Soviet and authoritarian. This limited the willingness to honour the humanitarian clauses in the Minsk Accords. Another factor was the fact that Ukraine

⁴⁰ Fischer, pp. 24–27.



was suffering from a persistent economic crisis linked to the war, Russian sanctions and insufficient reform, whereas Russia is big and has vast resources to help it weather crises and withstand Western sanctions. Several politicians in Kyiv increasingly came to regard the aberrant regions as an unnecessary burden. In 2016, a Ministry for Temporarily Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) was created with the aim of reintegrating the lost territory and its inhabitants. However, it was given few resources in comparison with other ministries and was able to achieve little.

Nor can the Ukrainian state do much to help the 1.5 million registered IDPs, who constitute the greatest humanitarian problem in its 30-year history. Over half of them are elderly and 16 per cent are minors. An act was adopted on the rights and freedoms of the IDPs in October 2014, but this only guaranteed their right to return home after the war. Under pressure from NGOs and international organisations, the act was amended to place an obligation on local authorities to help IDPs to find housing, and get medical care and schools for their children. A plan was formulated on employment and education for IDPs, but it received no funding. In November 2018 a strategy was launched on integration and long-term measures to 2020, including the protection of property rights, but it only contained recommendations and most of the work was done by NGOs using international aid. As a result, little assistance was provided by the Ukrainian state. Only 12 per cent of IDPs have their own housing, and more than half rent flats or rooms privately.

Furthermore, even though the state authorities have declared that IDPs should enjoy full equality in terms of rights and freedoms with other Ukrainians, they are

still discriminated against. Without a fixed address, IDPs have difficulties registering and many therefore cannot vote in elections, which is contrary to the Constitution. Pensions are pitiful and unrelated to previous length of employment, and benefits are only paid out by a designated state bank following physical identification at an office. About 100 000 have not even bothered to register.

Nonetheless, there have been no major conflicts between the IDPs and local communities. The IDPs largely fend for themselves and ignore the Ukrainian state bureaucracy. Most of them have managed to adapt to and integrate with local people, who are often helpful. In the absence of the state, international aid organisations have stepped in. A majority of the refugees do not wish to return home.⁴¹

Overall, the war in Donbas has deepened the rift between Donbas and the rest of Ukraine, and even more so between Ukraine and Russia. In the face of Russian aggression and propaganda, the Ukrainian leadership has also appealed to and promoted nationalist feelings, which are especially strong in the western part of the country.

Enter Zelenskyi

Ukraine was led by President Poroshenko for almost five years. He aspired to win the war but also used the conflicts with Russia as a way to secure support and keep the country together. Poroshenko was unable to resolve the deep-seated problems of corruption and economic stagnation. In the presidential election in April 2019 he was convincingly defeated by Volodymyr Zelenskyi, a young and popular television actor with no political experience. In July, Zelenskyi's newly founded political party, Servant of the People, won the

⁴¹ Niecypor, pp. 1–4; Fischer, p. 30.



parliamentary election and achieved an absolute majority, which had never been done before.

Zelenskyi promised to eliminate corruption, to modernise and reform society, and – as a priority – to stop the war through dialogue with Russia. Opinion polls indicated that people were fed up with the war.⁴² Zelenskyi's background as a Russian-speaking Jew from Krivih Rih in central Ukraine belied Russian propaganda claims that Ukraine was being run by a "fascist junta" that fed on anti-Semitism and Russophobia. The election once again demonstrated Ukraine's ability to hold free and fair democratic elections, in contrast to Russia, and could serve as a model for voters in Russia.

In contrast to other leaders, Putin did not congratulate Zelenskyi on his victory and in May issued a decree offering the inhabitants of the "people's republics" a fast track to Russian passports, and thus also citizenship – an offer he soon extended to all Ukrainians. This was called a humanitarian act but could also be seen as a step towards incorporating the regions.⁴³ In addition, Russia stopped all exports of oil and coal to Ukraine. Zelenskyi responded by offering to allow Russians to seek Ukrainian citizenship, probably not in earnest, since that could mean a flood of unreliable people entering the country and Furthermore, Ukraine does not accept dual citizenship.

Nonetheless, instead of relying on Ukrainian oligarchs as mediators, such as Viktor Medvedchuk who had good relations with

Russia, Zelenskyi re-established a direct channel by telephoning Putin. Negotiations began on a prisoner exchange, which in September 2019 led to the release of 35 prisoners by each side, among them the Ukrainian sailors in Crimea.⁴⁴

In accordance with an agreement of 2016 and in order to pave the way for a resumption of negotiations in the Normandy Group, Ukraine and the separatists withdrew troops from the frontline at Stanytsia Luhanska in June, and later at two more exposed places to create demilitarised "grey zones". In one location Zelenskyi had to intervene personally to stop protesting war veterans.⁴⁵

Moreover, under pressure from Putin, who made it a condition, but also from the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, and the Chancellor of German, Angela Merkel, who wanted to thaw their frozen ties with Russia, Zelenskyi on 1 October formally accepted the 'Steinmeier formula' on holding local elections and granting special status to the separatist regions. After Russian foot-dragging, a Normandy Group meeting, where Zelenskyi and Putin was set for Paris in December. As a gesture, Russia returned the captured Ukrainian naval ships.

Zelenskyi's concessions aroused strong protest from the nationalist opposition, however, who accused him of capitulation to Russia. Moreover Zelenskyi became involved in political infighting in the USA, formerly Ukraine's biggest sponsor in the West.⁴⁶ In order to appease his domestic critics, Zelenskyi made the elections

⁴² Michael Winiarski, "Folket är trötta på kriget, vi måste komma ur det på något sätt", (Interview with Foreign Minister Vadym Prystaiko) *Dagens nyheter*, 8 Nov. 2019, p. 14.

⁴³ Jakob Hedenskog, "Ukraine: The new president calls for snap elections, but will they change anything?", *RUFBS Briefing*, no. 45, June 2019.

⁴⁴ BBC World Service, Ukraine, "Ukraine and Russia exchange prisoners in landmark deal", 7 September

2019; Tatiana Stanovaya, "The Russia-Ukraine conflict: Hopeful signs of rapprochement have dissipated", *Riddle website*, 1 Oct. 2019, p. 1–2.

⁴⁵ Kalle Kniivilä, "Slutskrattat för komikern som blev Ukrainas president", 28 Oct. 2019, <https://www.glasnost.se/2019>, pp. 3–5.

⁴⁶ When it was revealed that President Trump withheld US military aid in order to force Zelenskyi to investigate the Ukrainian business dealings of Hunter Biden, the



conditional on a full ceasefire, the withdrawal of all foreign military units, the presence of Ukrainian border guards on the Russian border and an exchange of all remaining prisoners. He was clear that the elections must not take place “at the barrel of a gun” and insisted that candidates from all Ukrainian political parties should be able to participate.⁴⁷ In November, the government announced an increase in its defence and security spending by 16 per cent, up to 5.5 per cent of GDP.⁴⁸ The separatists retorted that any Ukrainian law on their special status had to be negotiated with them and rejected Ukrainian control of the border. Defiantly, the DPR adopted a law that defined its “state territory” as encompassing the entire Donetsk province, far beyond the existing frontline.⁴⁹

At the Normandy Group meeting in Paris, Ukraine and Russia agreed on the withdrawal of troops from three additional places before March 2020, an exchange of all conflict-related detainees (but not all prisoners) before 2020, expansion of OSCE monitoring to night-time and to hold the next meeting in four months. However, as before they failed to come to terms concerning the local elections. Zelenskyi insisted that they be held after Russia had withdrawn its troops and Ukraine had control over the border with Russia, while Putin wanted to yield control of the border

son of a leading candidate for the 2020 presidential election, this led to Trump’s impeachment. The risk is that Trump, who clearly prefers Russia to Ukraine as a partner, may choose to punish Ukraine.

⁴⁷ *BBC News*, “Ukraine conflict: Can peace plan in east finally bring peace?”, 29 October 2019; *BBC News*, Ukraine conflict: Zelensky plans troop frontline troop withdrawal. 4 Oct. 2019; Christopher Miller, “Explainer: What is the Steinmeier Formula, and did Zelenskyi just capitulate to Moscow?” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 2 October 2019, <https://rferl.org/a/what-is-the-steinmeier-formula>.

⁴⁸ *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, “Kyiv plans to boost defense spending to 9 billion USD as peace talks remain elusive”, 9 November 2019, https://rferl.org/a/kyiv_plans_to_boost

only after the elections, as stated in the Minsk accords (without acknowledging the Russian presence). A possible compromise would be to allow international troops to control the area until the elections had been held, but Russia has thus far rejected this.

Furthermore, Putin insisted that the Ukrainian Constitution would have to be amended to formalise the special status of the Donbas on a permanent basis, and that an amnesty for *all those* involved in the “events” must be implemented. For humanitarian reasons, he also wished to increase the number of border passage checkpoints. Zelenskyi on his side wanted to restore Ukraine’s territorial integrity by getting both Crimea and the occupied districts back. He accepted giving them special status in connection with the decentralisation of all Ukraine, but rejected federalisation and refused to negotiate with the “illegal republics.”⁵⁰

At the end of 2019, the separatists released 80 prisoners, among them military personnel, civilians and journalists, and Ukraine released 141 prisoners, including Berkut people involved in shooting demonstrators in Kyiv in February 2014. The latter evoked further protests.⁵¹

Thus, the Paris meeting may have been a success for Zelenskyi’s aim to calm the

⁴⁹ Halya Coynash, “Russian-controlled Donetsk republic claims more Ukrainian territory”, *Human rights in Ukraine*, Website of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, 2 Nov. 2019, khpg.org/en/index.php?

⁵⁰ *Ukrainian Crisis Media Center*, “Paris summit of the Normandy Four: Ukraine’s tactics wins”, 10 December 2019, www.ukrainian_crisis.org/74330; *President of Russia*, “Joint news conference following a Normandy format summit”, 10 December 2019, p. 2; Anna-Lena Laurén; “President Zelenskyi satsar på utnötningsmetoden mot Putin”, *Dagens nyheter*, 11 Dec. 2019, p. 12.

⁵¹ Kalle Kniivilä, “Ukraina släpper terrorister i utbyte mot journalister”, 30 Dec. 2019, www.glasnost.se/2019/ukraina-slapper-terrorister-i-utbyte-mot-journalister.



conflict and gain increased Western backing for peace and development in Ukraine, and Merkel and Macron also put pressure on Putin at the conference. However, Ukraine is unlikely to get its aberrant regions back. Even if the elections were to be fair and monitored, and IDPs and all Ukrainian political parties could participate, the separatists would probably win. After more than five years of war, the local authorities have reinforced their power with the assistance of Russian propaganda and material support. According to a recent poll, an overwhelming majority of the remaining population would now like to be absorbed into Russia and only a small minority want to be part of Ukraine. Most people blame Ukraine rather than Russia for the conflict and remain hostile to the EU and NATO.⁵² Zelenskiy certainly knows this and will insist on conditions that Russia will find unacceptable to ensure that the elections never take place. It is also unlikely that the Ukrainian Parliament would grant the regions enough influence over Ukrainian domestic – and more specifically foreign – policy to satisfy Russia. The result will probably be the status quo and another “frozen conflict”, rather than an open one. Shooting from the separatist side has continued in 2020.

Consequences for Ukraine, Russia and the West

The above shows that the war in Donbas has had serious consequences for all the parties concerned, albeit to different degrees and in different ways. For the DPR and the LPR, apart from a clique of local politicians, military personnel and criminals, the war has been a disaster, killing or wounding tens of thousands, driving hundreds of thousands into exile and impoverishing millions. The

economy is at a standstill and cut off from the rest of Ukraine, and ordinary people are losing contact with other Ukrainians, thereby becoming totally dependent on Russian goodwill.

Ukraine, in addition to Crimea and the Sea of Azov, has lost control of an industrial region that was home to millions of people, and the war has become a heavy burden on an economy already plagued by corruption and bureaucracy and in urgent need of reforms and investment. Furthermore, the war has turned age-old close relations with Russia into hostility towards Putin’s regime, and disturbed many friendship and family relations. Formerly tight economic relations have been disrupted.⁵³

On the other hand, the war has welded the other parts of Ukraine together against Russia and reinforced its formerly weak national identity and unity. Losing the occupied regions will relieve Ukraine of enormous costs of reconstruction and the problem of reintegrating a now reluctant, pro-Russian people. It is true that the war has meant a loss of prestige, but stopping the western advance and foiling the grand designs of a superior power was an accomplishment.

For Russia, the conquest of Crimea and the Donbas war has reinforced President Putin in his position and thus far contributed to political “stability” in Russia. He has scored another victory in his “hybrid war” and, according to the propaganda, saved millions of Russian-speaking people from Ukrainian “fascists”, and from joining NATO and the EU. By forming and maintaining the separatist republics, Russia has acquired another means of influencing Ukraine’s domestic and foreign policy – to the extent

⁵² Nahaylo, pp. 2–5.

⁵³ Nonetheless, at the end of 2019 a transit agreement for Russian gas exports to Europe, which is an important source of income for Ukraine, was extended

for a further five years. *Meduza*, “At last minute, Russia and Ukraine agree to new five-year gas deal”, 23 December 2019, <https://meduza.io/feature/2019/12/23>.



that Ukraine wants them back – and the war has greatly complicated Ukraine’s ambition to join NATO and the EU. The war has shown that Russia is a Great Power that is able to act as it pleases in its neighbourhood irrespective of Western protests and sanctions. If Putin wants to increase pressure on Ukraine and demonstrate his power vis-à-vis the West, allowing the war in Donbas to flare up would be the most likely method.

However, even if Russia has acquired Crimea and parts of Donbas, the war has definitely destroyed relations with Ukraine, its most important Slavic neighbour, which it hoped would become a strong ally against the West. The war has also become an economic burden on Russia, and sustaining the republics even more so, especially if they are to be incorporated in the end. Furthermore, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and involvement in Donbas are another violation of the universal principles of non-aggression, sovereignty and territorial integrity, which has led to a disruption of political relations with Western democracies, more military activity and deployments by NATO in the Baltic Sea region, and tangible economic sanctions. Taken together, the situation resembles a return to the Cold War between Russia and the West.

Concerning the Western democracies, the events in Donbas and Crimea have revealed their lack of power vis-à-vis Russia in this faraway region. Even if they have taken measures against Russia and backed Ukraine politically and economically (with the USA even sending lethal weapons), they have not been able to force Russia to change its policy, only to keep the conflict under control. The security order in Europe established by the Helsinki Accords of 1975 has been badly shaken. Moreover, even if NATO and the EU have stuck together in upholding sanctions against Russia for over

five years, states such as Hungary and France are for various reasons increasingly calling for a resumption of contact and an end to sanctions. To them, improving relations and boosting trade with great power Russia is proving more important than the interests of Ukraine or universal principles. Russia’s involvement in Crimea and Donbas has therefore also helped to exacerbate splits in Europe.



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