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UKRAINE – DIFFICULT CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN A DEADLOCKED CONFLICT

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Almost one and a half years after the ceasefire in Eastern Ukraine entered into force, the conflict in the Donets Basin perdures, albeit dwarfed by other crisis areas. The increasingly violent armed conflict in Syria and ensuing streams of refugees heading towards Europe have directed public attention to the ongoing fighting there, and to its consequences. As Eastern Ukraine has not yet achieved a real truce, the conflict needs to be viewed in a wider geopolitical context and put on the agenda of international peace efforts again.

Minsk Agreement: Implementation Still Pending

Since the adoption of the Minsk agreement in February 2015, only one out of 13 points has so far been put into practice – the intensification of the Trilateral Contact Group's work. The withdrawal of heavy weapons and the exchange of prisoners have not yet been concluded. Despite the agreed ceasefire, the conflicting parties' weapons are not silent.

Especially in the first half of 2016, there was an increase in armed conflicts between the separatists and the Ukrainian Armed Forces which led to additional casualties on both sides. At some hot spots along the front line of the self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, fighting still arises sporadically. It occurs in the form of artillery fire and local skirmishes, in some of which heavy assets are employed as well.

The conduct of the conflict, nevertheless, is dominated by psychological warfare. Fighting is, however, no longer centred on targets such as airports, but has rather turned into a war of nerves about the opening and closure of borders and control posts. At the same time, a military resolution of the conflict is highly unlikely, since the weak Ukrainian Armed Forces are faced with a disciplined, approx. 35,000-strong rebel militia. Moreover, the latter could at any time be augmented by anonymised Russian Forces in the event of a critical development.

Irrespective of the fighting, the situation in the crisis areas remains critical. The population still inhabiting the conflict area, primarily the elderly and the socially weak, are living on their remaining resources. There is a lack of medicine and doctors; contrabandism and black marketing determine everyday life. All these facts are clear signs that major international effort is also required in Ukraine.

Small Advances on the Ground Despite Geopolitical Disagreement

The continuation of the conflict on a low level is steadily increasing the ideological divide between the regions. A cooling-down phase would definitely be called for, especially for the affected civilian population in the Donets Basin. Ukraine's representatives have repeatedly called for the deployment of a UN mission. This proposal has, however, not received any support, as a Russian Security Council veto is to be expected. Therefore, the OSCE keeps the central role it has been playing in easing tensions and fostering dialogue between the factions' opposing viewpoints. The intensified reporting by OSCE observers, the ongoing reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure, the enhanced surveillance of the conflict area, and the close cooperation with the EU may be recorded as positive aspects of international commitment.

Other efforts on the international level have proved far less successful. The entry into force of the ceasefire in Syria triggered a rapprochement between Russia and the U.S. on the diplomatic level. Since March this year, the two countries have repeatedly negotiated in order to harmonise all further steps required to completely implement the ceasefire in Syria. In so doing, both sides generally emphasised the direct influence of American-Russian relations on the efforts of the international community. On the sidelines of the diplomatic talks, the dialogue partners also touched upon the conflict in Ukraine.

In this respect, both parties signalled that they were generally open for discussions, although there was some disagreement on the sequence of their joint implementation of the Minsk agreement. While the US consistently advocated unrestricted access to Eastern Ukraine and the Ukrainian border by the OSCE mission, Russia emphasised the question of the status of parts of the Don-

bas and the conduct of elections in these areas again and again. It is these different positions that are to blame for the standstill on the international level. This stagnation was impossible to overcome even with the help of advances made by Russia in June 2016, addressing the possible armament of the OSCE mission. Moscow's proposal, a response to recent encroachments on members of the mission, as well as to joint patrols of the OSCE and the police, which had been rejected by the separatists from the outset, was considered by many observers to be a tactical manoeuvre before the renewal of EU sanctions against Russia.

EU Renews Its Sanctions, Sets Incentives for Reforms, and Is at Odds

Since the EU invariably refuses to lift its sanctions against Russia unless the Minsk agreement is fully implemented, in June 2016 the Council extended the restrictive measures by another six months. On 1 January 2016, the free trade agreement with Ukraine had already entered into force, the implementation of which was intended to improve the Ukrainian economic situation. At the same time, visa-free entry, eagerly awaited by the Ukrainian population, was made contingent on the implementation of reforms by the Kiev government in the fields of constitutionality, market economy, protection of minorities, and administration.

This ambitious plan for Ukraine must, however, not obscure the fact that the divergent positions of EU member states regarding the issue of sanctions are driving a wedge into their common policy concerning Russia. While the Council's reasoning with regard to the sanctions is unambiguous, some EU countries have repeatedly called these measures in general into question. Such opinions, however, are frequently utilised by Russian politicians and the media to highlight the dissent among EU members, and to legitimise their own political actions.

USA and NATO – between Confrontation and Cooperation

The US is continuing on its clear political course vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine. Therefore, Congress is considering tightening the US sanctions rather than loosening them, thus going beyond those of the EU. Even arms deliveries to Ukraine have been discussed recently, since the US support has so far been restricted to financial, technical and legal measures. In fact, the US promised Ukraine over 200 million US dollars as economic aid and over 300 million for the security-sector reform.

Moreover, from 2017 the United States is going to enhance NATO's operational readiness with an additional brigade and to improve its troops' ability to respond in Eastern Europe. Consequently, in view of the threat emanating from Russia, NATO defence ministers have agreed to augment the NATO contingent by four rotating battalions on the Eastern flank of the Alliance. Through this augmentation, the Alliance aims to emphasise its solidarity with its Eastern European members and to show its resolve to Russia, in order to put relations back on an even keel.

This double strategy of deterrence and keeping open channels of communication was reflected in the convening of the NATO-Russia Summit on 20 April 2016, which had been put on ice in 2014. However, the two sides merely managed to agree on practical cooperation in order to prevent any misunderstandings from arising. With regard to Ukraine, where NATO provides the armed forces with financial, structural and strategic support, they did not reach any consensus. The talks failed – hardly surprisingly – because of the divergent opinions on Russia's role in Eastern Ukraine.

Russia Distracts and Seeks Way Out of Isolation

Russia does not perceive itself as a player

in the Ukraine conflict; therefore, Moscow refers to the most recent extension of EU sanctions as “illogical”. As, from Moscow's perspective, the implementation of the Ukrainian roadmap for peace exclusively rests with the Kiev government and Russia is in the exact same position as Germany or France as none of these countries is able to fulfil a single term of the Minsk agreement. This viewpoint underlies the line of argumentation taken by many Russian politicians and generals who have been alleging Russia's isolation in Europe and attempting to relegate the Ukraine crisis to the background of other conflict areas.

The augmentation of NATO troops in Eastern Europe has served the Russian representatives as proof of western attempts to isolate Russia, which has allegedly forced Moscow to take the respective counter-measures at its own western border. Nevertheless, the Russian leadership claims to be receptive to dialogue “at eye level”, since any possible solution of the problems paramount in its view, such as terrorism and migration, must involve Russia. The deployment of Russian troops in Syria is often cited to confirm this claim.

Currently, Russia is being isolated primarily on the economic level, which is why it ought to be interested in mobilising the Normandy format and in implementing the Minsk agreement. In this context, Russia's ambivalent attitude towards the separatist areas is being revealed. Without Russia's support, which, for example, accounts for 70 percent of the GDP of the People's Republic of Donetsk, these areas would be unable to sustain themselves. This share is to be lowered to 30 percent, if possible. However, no annexation or recognition is being planned. This ambiguous policy becomes evident insofar as Moscow is interested in economically invigorating the Donbass region, but then again it has been making the exportation of goods from these areas considerably more difficult by demanding Ukrainian customs documents.

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Russia's enduring serious economic crisis did not prevent Moscow from imposing further sanctions on Ukraine. Thus, Russia reacted to the Ukrainian sanctions, some of which were already implemented in 2015, and the free trade agreement by taking certain countermeasures. In so doing, Moscow accepts a further erosion of its own economy and additional hardships for the crisis-ridden Russian population.

Ukraine Is Caught up in Itself

The war of sanctions between Moscow and Kiev is not only aggravating the conflict between the two parties, but is also putting enormous strain on Ukraine's economy. However, its harsh treatment of Russia has afforded Kiev the chance to divert attention from its own severe political problems.

For one, the high expectations of the population were not fulfilled after the uprising in 2014, as President Poroshenko failed to implement the promised reform plan. Prime Minister Yatsenyuk was held responsible for this failure in an information campaign that lasted several months, and he consequently resigned in April 2016. However, the ensuing government reshuffle has so far only resulted in a change of faces rather than in any change of the political programme. The Kiev central government, which is economically and politically dependent on regional elites, has not gained in efficacy. The trading of political posts, black economy, and a scandal about the so-called "black cash boxes" belonging to the Party of Regions have dominated public discourse.

Thus, the current events have further weakened the population's identification with the political parties. On the other hand, individual personalities such as former military pilot Nadezhda Savchenko, who has recently been released from prison by Russian authorities and is now a political activist, are hailed as the new bearers of hope. But even though there is still hope, currently there

are no clear political positions – also with a view to the future of the separatist areas and Ukraine's relationship with Russia as its neighbour.

Conclusions / Recommendations

- There are many clues that the Donbass will remain with Ukraine. To make reintegration possible, it is necessary to implement the Minsk agreement as quickly as possible and to give the population in the Donets Basin some positive incentives.
- The reform programmes of the EU in Ukraine must be directed primarily at establishing a functioning political system (e.g. implementing an administrative reform, combating corruption) and capacity building. Thus, the development of new narratives poisoning the co-existence of the population in the Donbass and the relationship with neighbouring Russia are to be counteracted through open discourse.
- Russia's role and its will to cooperate should be revealed taking into consideration the concrete measures it takes (implementation of the Minsk agreement), and the sanctions against Moscow must then be adjusted accordingly. Any compromises proposed to the Kremlin, however, bear the risk of being interpreted as signs of weakness.
- As no UN mission is to be expected, the present deployment of the OSCE must be supported even more. An OSCE mission armed with pistols would not make any sense, as it would neither protect the Special Monitoring Mission nor make it more effective; it would also not provide additional solving capacities.

Note: This contribution exclusively represents the author's own opinion.