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The ceasefire in eastern Ukraine

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In Minsk on 5 September, members of the so-called trilateral contact group (Ukraine, Russia, the OSCE) and representatives of the separatists signed a protocol on a ceasefire in eastern Ukraine. The provisions of the agreement are general; they do not assume a resolution of the conflict or a stabilisation of the situation in the east. The ceasefire gives Ukraine a time to reorganise its military forces involved in the fighting in the east, and also to hold parliamentary elections in October. For Russia, however, it is part of a policy of small steps on the way to imposing conditions on the Ukrainian authorities to resolve the conflict that could weaken Ukrainian statehood and Kyiv's ability to restore the state. The continuation of Russia's military operation is associated with rising domestic (victims among Russian soldiers) and international costs (tightening Western sanctions). However, in the absence of prospects for achieving its goals through political negotiations, Moscow could decide to re-escalation military action, in order to step up pressure on Kyiv and its supporters in the West.

The Minsk protocol

The agreement is general in nature and consists of 12 short points. These relate to technical issues related to the cessation of hostilities and a political settlement of the conflict in Ukraine. In this first area, the following matters were established: an immediate ceasefire; the unconditional release of all prisoners of war and hostages by both parties; the withdrawal of illegal armed groups and military equipment, fighters and mercenaries from the territory of Ukraine; the creation of a security zone on both sides of the Ukrainian-Russian border and monitoring by the OSCE of the situation on the border; and granting the OSCE the role as a monitor of the ceasefire. The political agreement provides for the following steps: giving 'selected regions' of the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts (i.e. those *de facto* controlled by the separatists) 'special status' under Ukrainian law, which would envisage them holding early elections to local authorities, as well as an unspecified kind of decentralisation (President Poroshenko announced that a parliamentary bill would be introduced in the week after 15 September). Also more generally, commitments were given to start a national social dialogue, prepare development programmes for the Donbas's economic recovery, improve the humanitarian situation, and to prevent the prosecution and punishment of participants in the separatist movements.

The agreement has led to a genuine decrease in the intensity of fighting in the east of Ukraine. Although the Ukrainian side has accused separatists and Russian troops of 89 attacks on Ukrainian forces, resulting in the deaths of four soldiers, from the introduction of

the ceasefire until the morning of 9 September, it officially recognises that the ceasefire is being respected. President Poroshenko announced on 10 September that according to Ukrainian intelligence, 70% of Russian military forces have left the territory of Ukraine. Moscow also maintains that the ceasefire is being generally respected, and any incidents that have occurred have been provoked by Ukrainian forces not under Kyiv's control.

Ukraine's calculations

The Ukrainian side was forced to sign the agreement as a result of the successful military offensives by the separatists, supported by regular Russian troops, in August and early September. They inflicted heavy losses on Ukrainian troops, which have also founds themselves in unfavourable positions (some units have been surrounded, for example in Ilovaysk, Debaltsevo and Malomykolaivka southwest of Lugansk, and the airport in Donetsk; some of their supply lines were interrupted; and also, units that have been in combat for several months had to be relieved). It has become apparent that the Ukrainian forces are currently unable to recover the military control they have lost over part of the Donbas.

By signing the agreement in Minsk, the Ukrainian government is attempting to bring about through political means a resolution to the conflict which will work in its favour. Although prospects for the recovery of real control over the areas lost in the conflict are now illusory, it is in Kyiv's interest to stabilise the situation in the regions adjacent to the areas controlled by the separatists. From the military point of view, a ceasefire gives the Ukrainian side time to regroup and re-arm its troops, and reinforce its troops fighting in the east with new units.

For President Poroshenko the early parliamentary elections scheduled for 26 October are also crucial. They will permit the creation of a stable parliament and government which can run the country in a situation of deep crisis. A continuation of the war, which is increasingly exposing Ukraine's military weakness, would be costly for the president. He would also come under increasing pressure to introduce martial law, which would formally make holding the elections impossible.

Russia's calculations

For Russia, continuing military operations leading to the need to occupy the Donbas and expand into other regions of Ukraine, while possible from a military point of view, is not the preferred scenario. Such a move would entail high military losses. It is now becoming increasingly hard to hide the casualties among Russian soldiers; they are beginning to raise concerns among the Russian public, and thus may negatively affect support for Vladimir Putin. The escalation of the conflict, especially any attempt to extend it beyond the Donbas, would also mean stronger antagonism and resistance from the Ukrainian public.

Military action would also prevent any resolution to the growing problems of the Donbas's residents' falling living standards, and their increasing fatigue with the war. Meanwhile, a halt to the fighting makes it possible to consolidate the pro-Russian separatists' power over the most important part of the Donbas.

By continuing the war, Russia would also bring negative international consequences on itself, especially the risk of further sanctions. Meanwhile, Moscow hopes that by creating

hopes for a political end to the conflict via the ceasefire, it will encourage the West to exert increased pressure on Poroshenko to adopt the Russian conditions for resolving the situation in the name of peace.

Assessing the benefits for both sides

Given the scale of the Ukrainian military defeat, the contents of the Minsk protocol will all in all prove quite beneficial for Ukraine, if they are fully respected. Kyiv has obtained a ceasefire which will give it time and – which is of considerable public importance – an exchange of prisoners of war (according to the Ukrainian side, by 9 September 648 people of about 1200 had been freed). At the same time, the concessions apply only to those areas which are not under Ukrainian control anyway (i.e. specific regions of Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts, rather than the entire area, or other regions of Ukraine to which the separatists have laid claim). Nor has Kyiv acknowledged the legitimacy of the self-proclaimed separatist Donetsk and Lugansk 'people's republics' (they are not even mentioned in the document), although the protocol is the first joint document which bears the signatures of representatives of Ukraine and the separatists.

The provisions contained in the Minsk agreements do not meet any of the main demands put forward by the Russian side; for example, they do not provide for the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the Donbas, and do not guarantee the federalisation of Ukraine. From the Russian point of view, however, it is vital that the agreement opens the way for dialogue on a political settlement of the conflict and the future of Ukraine. For Russia, this is an element of its policy of taking small steps aimed at leading to Ukraine's political subordination to Moscow, or at least imposing conditions on it that prevent the state being restored, or any process of European integration. The adoption of the agreement while Newport was hosting the NATO summit, and the European Union was preparing the extension of sanctions against Russia, was especially beneficial for Moscow. Thanks to the ceasefire, the Kremlin could demonstrate a constructive attitude in the conflict, and thus offer a successful argument against its Western opponents who favour hardening the political line in the EU and NATO towards Russia.

Prospects

The Minsk agreement will not bring an end to the conflict. Its vague and general provisions allow a great deal of flexibility in its interpretation by both parties, depending on their political needs. Russia will use the agreement to further push the solutions it has itself put forward, especially recognising the legitimacy of the separatists and the future international status and federal political system of Ukraine. This may be indicated by the intensification of the separatists' demands for full independence from Ukraine, and the push by Moscow to force the idea of Ukraine's neutral status, guaranteed by Russia, the most important EU countries and the USA, onto the international stage.

In an attempt to resolve the political crisis in accordance with its own interests, Russia has not ruled out a likely return to military action in the absence of political success. At this stage, however, it is more likely that the (pro)Russian forces will systematically violate the ceasefire, albeit on a limited scale. This will serve as an element of pressure on the

authorities in Kyiv, and is also intended to discredit and weaken President Poroshenko politically in the light of the early parliamentary elections in October.

Kyiv's actions will depend on the policies Russia chooses to follow. For Ukraine, the parliamentary elections are most important; it will thus seek to avoid the escalation of military action. At the same time, in a pre-election situation, the Ukrainian government is unlikely to opt for any further concessions to Russia and the separatists. Ukraine will strengthen its military forces in the east of the country, in order to be able to maintain the current state of territorial occupation. Meanwhile Kyiv will try to drag Russia into lengthy political negotiations, refusing any solutions which will not lie in its interest, while trying to limit the negative influence of pro-Russian separatism on the rest of Ukraine.