

A possible escalation in the tension in Donbas

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Over the last three months the military situation in Donbas has deteriorated. Since the beginning of the year 20 Ukrainian soldiers have died in military operations in the east of Ukraine, and this marks a significant increase compared to 2020, when 49 soldiers lost their lives (including between 15 to 27 July, when a ceasefire was in effect). In February 2021 Ukrainian positions were fired upon 180 times. In comparison, in August 2020 (the first month of the full ceasefire in force) 48 incidents were recorded. With the ceasefire not being *de facto* respected by either party to the conflict, it remains an open question whether the ceasefire will be upheld. In a situation of President Volodymyr Zelensky becoming increasingly impatient due to the prolonged political impasse regarding the settlement of the conflict in the Donbas and the escalation of the tension both between Russia and Ukraine and between Russia and the West, it cannot be ruled out that military operations in this conflict region will intensify substantially.

Commentary

- The willingness President Zelensky displayed at the beginning of his term in office to reach a genuine compromise regarding the issue of Donbas, which was manifested in his conciliatory position in relations with Russia, did not bring about the expected outcomes. The summit of the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany (the Normandy format) held in December 2019 in Paris did not lead to a breakthrough and the majority of the agreements concluded then were not implemented. The main cause of the failure of the negotiations is Russia seeking to settle the conflict on its own terms, which are: the Ukrainian government recognising the legitimacy of the authorities of the self-proclaimed republics and that elections in the occupied territories are held without the armed groups being withdrawn and without reinstating checks at the Russian-Ukrainian border. As for Ukraine, it does not accept these terms because this would in fact lead to considerable limitation of the country's sovereignty.
- The lack of a breakthrough in the talks on the conflict in Donbas has led Zelensky to adopt a more assertive policy towards Russia. This was exemplified in February this year when sanctions were imposed on Viktor Medvedchuk, the leading pro-Russian politician in Ukraine (who has family links with Vladimir Putin) and when three pro-Russian TV news channels were blocked from broadcasting. Zelensky has also expressed his mounting irritation in the form of appeals to the US to become involved in the settlement of the conflict and to pledge support for the Crimean Platform (a new plan regarding

annexed Crimea) and for Ukraine's membership in NATO.

- The argument that the Ukrainian government has used to try to convince its Western partners to place pressure on Russia is emphasising that the military actions launched by Russia in the Donbas may further escalate. It seems that such a development would be useful for Ukraine since it would encourage its European partners to adopt a more decided position on settling the conflict in the east of Ukraine and/or organising another summit in the Normandy format. Zelensky is frustrated with the ineffectiveness of this negotiating format to date, but he cannot clearly challenge it since it is linked with the Western sanctions imposed on Russia. Furthermore, keeping the sanctions in place is an important factor (in the opinion of voters in Ukraine) which influences the assessment of the effectiveness of Ukraine's foreign policy.
- Zelensky's vague words about conducting individual talks with the leaders of the Normandy format and the announcement made by Andrii Yermak, the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, about a new peace plan for the Donbas may also be seen in the context of placing pressure on France and Germany. The above mentioned peace plan was said to have been developed by German and French diplomats. Both initiatives have been articulated only once and it is difficult to gauge their credibility. The expectation expressed by the Ukrainian government that the US should play a substantial role in the negotiation process can be deemed another form of pressure put on Germany and France. At present the US position on the conflict in Donbas which has been presented by the new US president Joe Biden, is more principled towards Russia than it was under the Trump administration.
- A systematic decline in the support pledged for Zelensky and his party, the Servant of the People, in opinion polls is an important factor determining the firm measures that the Ukrainian president has been taking. The resolution of the conflict in Donbas was his main electoral promise made to respond to expectations in society. Not fulfilling it will not only undermine his credibility as a politician, it will also present an obstacle to when he (most likely) stands for re-election. Zelensky intends to counter attempts made by his opponents to discredit him as an ineffective politician by actively participating in the peace process in Donbas. The sanctions recently imposed on Medvedchuk, the leader of the pro-Russian political party Opposition Platform For Life, are also meant to serve this purpose; they are intended to convince Ukrainian voters of the president's determination to counter various forms of Russian aggression.
- The Kremlin is watching the measures undertaken by Ukraine, both those with regard to delaying the negotiations about the resolution of the conflict in Donbas and the sanctions imposed on pro-Russian media and politicians, with increasing exasperation. Russia sees the actions taken to postpone the peace talks as an attempt to revise the Minsk Agreements to the advantage of Ukraine. The ongoing impasse, the further cooling of the relations between Russia and the West, and the crisis in Belarus are encouraging the Kremlin to adopt a more confrontational approach, including in its relations with Ukraine. Russia is expecting that the escalation of the military operations in Donbas, combined with standard information warfare and possible anti-Ukrainian economic and kinetic measures (such as cyberattacks against critical infrastructure and sabotage operations) will place Ukraine under increasing pressure and force the Western countries to attempt

mediation.

- The deterioration of the military situation is accompanied by an intensified presence of matériel and reconnaissance units of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, and the mobilisation of separatist armed groups in the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. An uptick in the number of incidents may be used to provoke Ukraine to launch reprisal operations which Russia would present as an act of unjustified aggression. Media disinformation campaigns are an important element of raising the tension. They are aimed at creating a distorted image of the opponent's goals, fuelling the atmosphere of the threat of an armed conflict and at discrediting the political initiatives which both parties to the conflict in Donbas have undertaken in order to resolve it.