

III. Armed conflict and the peace process in Ukraine

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Ukraine has been the focus of Europe's main territorial conflict since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 and the outbreak of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine shortly thereafter.¹ The conflict in Ukraine is driven by and also helps to drive the wider geopolitical confrontation between Russia and Western powers.² The supply of arms and military assistance to the Ukrainian Government (from the United States and other member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and to the non-state armed groups in eastern Ukraine (backed by Russia) also exemplifies the internationalized nature of the conflict.³

The political changes in Ukraine in 2019—the election of Volodymyr Zelensky as president and his newly formed party, Servant of the People, becoming the first party in independent Ukraine to win an outright parliamentary majority—brought renewed expectations that it might be possible to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine.⁴ However, at the end of 2019 fundamental disagreements endured among the conflict parties (including external state supporters on both sides) about the nature of the conflict and their involvement in it, as well as the implementation of existing agreements.⁵ It was not possible to overcome these fundamental disagreements in 2020. However, a new ceasefire agreement in July 2020 led to much lower levels of violence and military and civilian casualties during the year, and the conflict appeared to be heading in the direction of becoming another of Europe's simmering conflicts (see section I).

¹ For a discussion on the initial causes of the conflict in Ukraine see Wilson, A., 'External intervention in the Ukraine conflict: Towards a frozen conflict in the Donbas', *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, pp. 143–57; and Clem, R. S., 'Clearing the fog of war: Public versus official sources and geopolitical storylines in the Russia-Ukraine conflict', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 58, no. 6 (2017), pp. 592–612. On the various armed groups fighting in conflict see Galeotti, M., *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine* (Osprey Publishing: Oxford, 2019). On the economic underpinnings of the conflict see International Crisis Group, *Peace in Ukraine (III): The Costs of War in Donbas*, Europe Report no. 261 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 3 Sep. 2020).

² For a detailed analysis of the roles of external actors in and around Ukraine see Wittke, C. and Rabinovych, M., 'Five years after: The role of international actors in the "Ukraine Crisis"', *East European Politics*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2019), pp. 259–63; and International Crisis Group, *Peace in Ukraine I: A European War*, Europe Report no. 256 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 28 Apr. 2020). On Russia's political and economic coercive approaches towards Ukraine see Hurak, I. and D'Anieri, P., 'The evolution of Russian political tactics in Ukraine', *Problems of Post-Communism* (2020).

³ For details of the internationalized nature see Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and the peace process in Ukraine', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 123–25.

⁴ 'Hope and fear: Can Volodymyr Zelensky live up to the expectations he has created?', *The Economist*, 26 Sep. 2019.

⁵ For developments in the peace process in 2019 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2020* (note 3), pp. 126–28.

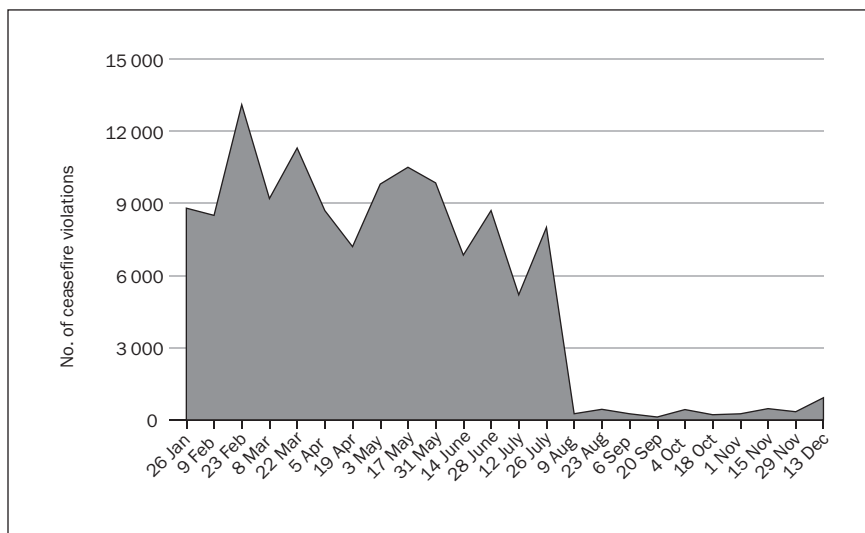


Figure 5.2. Ceasefire violations in Ukraine, 13 Jan.–13 Dec. 2020

Note: Each point represents the end of the corresponding 2-week reporting cycle.

Sources: Various bi-weekly status reports by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.

The peace process and a new ceasefire agreement

The 2014–15 Minsk agreements set out steps that the conflict parties (Ukrainian Government, separatist statelets and Russia) needed to take to bring about peace in the Donbas region.⁶ These steps were meant to lead to the reintegration of the breakaway areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions into Ukraine while offering them a measure of autonomy. However, the conflict parties (and, to some extent, their external state supporters) had fundamentally different interpretations of the Minsk agreements and how they should be implemented. This impasse could not be overcome during 2020.⁷ Moreover, the disengagement process initiated by the Zelensky administration in 2019 and a proposed prisoner exchange between the Ukrainian Government and separatists also stalled. While the sides had agreed in December 2019 to disengage in three more zones (in addition to the three previously completed in Petriviske, Stanytsia Luhanska and Zolote) by the end of March 2020, they had still not agreed on the next disengagement

⁶‘Protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group with respect to the joint steps aimed at the implementation of the peace plan of the president of Ukraine, P. Poroshenko, and the initiatives of the president of Russia, V. Putin’ (Minsk Protocol, or Minsk I Agreement), 5 Sep. 2014; and ‘Package of measures for the implementation of the Minsk agreements’ (Minsk II Agreement), 12 Feb. 2015.

⁷On diverging positions within the Minsk Process see Druey, C. et al., ‘The Minsk Process: Societal perceptions and narratives’, OSCE Insights 8, Nomos, 2020.

locations but pledged to continue working towards this goal.⁸ In November four new disengagement areas were agreed: near Hryhorivka in the Donetsk region, and Nyzhnoteple, Petrivka and Slovyanoserbsk villages in the Luhansk region.⁹ However, the proposed prisoner exchange continued to be blocked.¹⁰

Ukrainian Government forces and Russian-backed separatist forces remained locked in low-level combat for much of 2020. The United Nations secretary-general's appeal in March for a global ceasefire had little or no impact on the conflict, despite some expressions of local and international support.¹¹ There have been more than 20 previous ceasefire attempts in the six years of conflict; all have failed to be sustainable, with many being violated almost immediately. However, a new 'comprehensive, sustainable and unlimited ceasefire' was agreed at a videoconference meeting of the Trilateral Contact Group (the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Russia and Ukraine) and representatives from the separatist regions on 22 July 2020, which took effect five days later.¹² The ceasefire largely held, despite initial and continuing low levels of violations being reported by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine (see figure 5.2), although it is difficult to predict whether or how long the ceasefire will remain in effect.¹³ Fighting was already beginning to escalate in late December.¹⁴

Ongoing restrictions on freedom of movement in eastern Ukraine, which were exacerbated by closures of entry–exit checkpoints and other measures to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, made it more difficult for the OSCE SMM to Ukraine—the largest civilian peace operation in Europe—to observe and report on ceasefire violations.¹⁵ These restrictions also hindered

⁸ On the obstacles that have stood in the way of ceasefires and disengagement see International Crisis Group, *Peace in Ukraine (II): A New Approach to Disengagement*, Europe Report no. 260 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 3 Aug. 2020).

⁹ 'Four new areas for disengagement of forces to appear in Donbass—JFO HQ', 112 Ukraine, 4 Nov. 2020.

¹⁰ Zinets, N., 'Ukraine expects to swap 100 prisoners with Russian-backed separatists within weeks', Reuters, 6 Aug. 2020; 'Ukraine urges Russia, Donbas representatives to unblock prisoner swap', 112 Ukraine, 28 Oct. 2020.

¹¹ 'Stoltenberg calls for ceasefire to fight Covid-19 crisis in Ukraine's east', *Kyiv Post*, 3 Apr. 2020; and France in the United Kingdom, French Embassy in London, 'Paris and Berlin reiterate UN chief's call for ceasefire in eastern Ukraine', Joint statement by French and German foreign ministers, 30 Mar. 2020. On the UN secretary-general's global ceasefire call see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

¹² 'Press statement of Special Representative Grau after the regular meeting of Trilateral Contact Group on 22 July 2020', OSCE, 23 July 2020.

¹³ The OSCE SMM to Ukraine makes daily and ad hoc reports on the crisis in Ukraine; see <<https://www.osce.org/ukrainecrisis>>. 'Ukraine ceasefire violated more than 100 times within days: OSCE', Al Jazeera, 29 July 2020.

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, 'CrisisWatch', Conflict tracker, accessed Dec. 2020.

¹⁵ Liechtenstein, S., 'How Covid-19 is impairing the work of the OSCE in eastern Ukraine', Security and Human Rights Monitor, 17 Apr. 2020.

international and humanitarian organizations in providing medical supplies and protective gear, and hindered the population in the Donbas region when seeking medical care in Russia or Ukraine.¹⁶

The humanitarian impact of the armed conflict

The armed conflict between Ukrainian Government forces and Russian-backed separatists has led to over 13 000 deaths since April 2014, including at least 3367 civilian deaths.¹⁷ However, battle-related deaths and civilian casualties in the Donbas region have been much lower since 2018 than in earlier years: there were an estimated 109 conflict-related deaths in 2020 (down from 403 in 2019 and 893 in 2018).¹⁸ In contrast, there were over 18 000 confirmed Covid-19-related deaths in Ukraine in 2020.¹⁹

The economic consequences of the conflict have been considerable, resulting in an estimated decrease in Ukraine's per capita gross domestic product over the period 2013–17 of 15 per cent. The decrease in the Donbas regions of Donetsk and Luhansk during 2013–16 is estimated at 47 per cent.²⁰ In addition, at least 3.4 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance during 2020.²¹ At least 1 million people remained internally displaced, while an estimated 1 million refugees have left Donbas for Russia since the conflict began.²² Eastern Ukraine also has some of the world's worst landmine contamination.²³

¹⁶ Thompson, J. T., 'Searching for Covid-19 ceasefires: Conflict zone impacts, needs, and opportunities', US Institute of Peace special report, 15 Sep. 2020; Abibok, Y., 'Trapped in eastern Ukraine', Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 28 Aug. 2020; and OSCE, 'Checkpoints along the contact line: Challenges civilians face when crossing', Thematic report, SEC.FR/876/20, Dec. 2020.

¹⁷ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 February–31 July 2020* (OHCHR: 2020), p. 7; and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 November 2019 to 15 February 2020* (OHCHR: 2020), p. 8.

¹⁸ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 'Data export tool', accessed 13 Jan. 2021.

¹⁹ 'Covid-19 in Ukraine: Tracking the outbreak', *Kyiv Post*, [n.d.].

²⁰ Bluszcz, J. and Valente, M., 'The economic costs of hybrid wars: The case of Ukraine', *Defence and Peace Economics* (2020).

²¹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) 'Ukraine, situation report', 19 Oct. 2020.

²² The Government of Ukraine reports around 1.5 million internally displaced persons, but international organizations estimate the number to be under 1 million. 'Registration of internal displacement', Ukraine Ministry of Social Policy/UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 27 Oct. 2020; US Congressional Research Service (CRS), *Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and US Policy*, CRS Report for Congress R45008 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 29 Apr. 2020), p. 17; and Litvinova, M., [My mother put me on a train to Belgorod, and the next day a shell hit the station building], *Kommersant*, 18 Apr. 2020 (in Russian).

²³ 'Eastern Ukraine one of the areas most contaminated by landmines in the world', UN OCHA, 4 Apr. 2019. On the impact of landmines, also see chapter 13, section I, in this volume.