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. The conflict in Ukraine is driven by and also helps to drive the wider geopolitical confrontation between Russia and Western powers. 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.

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. 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. 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).


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

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. 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. 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

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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.

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

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. 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. 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. Fighting was already beginning to escalate in late December.

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. These restrictions also hindered

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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.
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. 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). In contrast, there were over 18 000 confirmed Covid-19-related deaths in Ukraine in 2020.

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. In addition, at least 3.4 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance during 2020. At least 1 million people remained internally displaced, while an estimated 1 million refugees have left Donbas for Russia since the conflict began. Eastern Ukraine also has some of the world’s worst landmine contamination.

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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.