

## II. Armed conflict in Ukraine and the risk of spillover to a major interstate war

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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 initial causes of this conflict and the extent to which it represents a non-international armed conflict with primarily domestic origins or a foreign intervention by Russia remain intensely contested.<sup>1</sup> The conflict centres on clashes between Russian-backed non-state armed groups and the Ukrainian government in two regions, Donetsk and Luhansk, which are part of an area known as Donbas. While Russia has consistently denied the presence of its military forces in Donbas, Western and Ukrainian officials assert that Russia supports the separatists with military forces, equipment and funding. In May 2021 Ukraine estimated that almost 3000 Russian military personnel, mostly in command and control positions, were present in eastern Ukraine, with the total number of Russia-led fighters estimated at more than 35 000.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, the armed conflict in 2021 is defined as a low-intensity, internationalized, subnational armed conflict.<sup>3</sup> A new ceasefire agreement in July 2020 led to much lower levels of violence and military and civilian casualties for the next six months.<sup>4</sup> However, fundamental disagreements at the root of the conflict persisted throughout 2021, with more intense outbreaks of fighting taking place from late March 2021 onwards along the 450 kilometre line of contact that divides Donbas.

The conflict is also driven by and helps drive the wider geopolitical confrontation between Russia and Western powers. The internationalized nature of the conflict took on a new dimension in 2021 as Russia amassed troops on its border with Ukraine, first in March–April and again in November, in moves widely interpreted within Western circles as a potential prelude to a new invasion of Ukraine—although Russia denied this. At the

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on the initial causes of the conflict in Ukraine see *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).

<sup>2</sup> Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the International Organizations in Vienna, 'Statement on Russia's on-going aggression against Ukraine and illegal occupation of Crimea', 27 May 2021. On Russia's hybrid warfare operations in Ukraine see McCrory, D., 'Russian electronic warfare, cyber and information operations in Ukraine', *RUSI Journal*, vol. 165, no. 7 (2021), pp. 34–44.

<sup>3</sup> For conflict definitions and typologies see chapter 2, section I, in this volume. For details of the internationalized nature of the armed conflict see *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 123–25.

<sup>4</sup> On casualty trends in the conflict see International Crisis Group, 'Visualising the dynamics of combat and negotiations in Donbas', International Crisis Group Commentary, 3 Aug. 2021.

end of December 2021, despite emerging diplomatic efforts (see section I), there had been no withdrawal of Russian troops, and further troops had been deployed on exercises in neighbouring Belarus. As such, the situation remained tense.

The Ukrainian government receives arms and military assistance from the United States and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states, with the USA having allocated more than \$2.7 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since 2014.<sup>5</sup> In September 2021, the USA announced plans to provide ‘a new \$60 million package for additional Javelin anti-armour systems and other defensive lethal and non-lethal capabilities’.<sup>6</sup>

Many Russians believe parts of Ukraine to be a historical province of Russia, and in July 2021 President Putin published an essay arguing that Russians and Ukrainians were ‘one people’.<sup>7</sup> However, an opinion poll conducted just after Putin’s article was published showed that 70 per cent of Ukrainians disagreed with this view.<sup>8</sup>

### **The humanitarian impact of the armed conflict and the role of the OSCE**

The armed conflict between Ukrainian government forces and Russian-backed separatists has led to over 13 000 deaths since April 2014, including at least 3390 civilian deaths.<sup>9</sup> However, battle-related deaths and civilian casualties in Donbas have been much lower since 2018 compared to previous years: there were an estimated 145 conflict-related deaths in 2021 (a slight increase from 113 in 2020).<sup>10</sup> At least 2.9 million people needed humanitarian assistance during 2021 and at least 1.4 million people remained internally displaced.<sup>11</sup> In addition, eastern Ukraine has some of the world’s

<sup>5</sup> On Western support for Ukraine see Fasola, N. and Wood, A. J., ‘Reforming Ukraine’s Security Sector’, *Survival*, vol. 63 no. 2 (2021), pp. 41–54; White House, ‘Joint Statement on the US–Ukraine Strategic Partnership’, 1 Sep. 2021; and US Department of State, ‘US Security Cooperation with Ukraine’, 20 Jan. 2022.

<sup>6</sup> US Department of Defense, ‘Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III’s meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Minister of Defense Andrii Taran’, 31 Aug. 2021. On arms imports by Ukraine in 2021 see chapter 9, section III, in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> President of Russia, ‘Article by Vladimir Putin “On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians”’, 12 July 2021. For a critique of these claims see Wilson, A., ‘Russia and Ukraine: “One People” as Putin claims?’, RUSI Commentary, 23 Dec. 2021.

<sup>8</sup> [Citizens’ assessment of the main theses of Putin’s article, ‘On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians’ (July–Aug. 2021)], Razumkov Center, 11 Aug. 2021 (in Ukrainian).

<sup>9</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 1 February to 31 July 2021* (OHCHR: 2021), pp. 8–9; and OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 November 2019 to 15 February 2020* (OHCHR: 2020), p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘Dashboard’, accessed 21 Jan. 2021.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Ukraine, situation report’, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), 22 Oct. 2021; and Welt, C., *Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and US Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress R45008 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 5 Oct. 2021), p. 15.

worst landmine contamination, with deaths and injuries from mines and unexploded ordnance increasing markedly in recent years.<sup>12</sup>

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) operates a Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in Ukraine, consisting of around 827 international unarmed civilian personnel. Although the SMM is deployed throughout Ukraine, it focuses on monitoring ceasefire violations and the presence of heavy weaponry within defined security zones in eastern Ukraine. The SMM issues daily and spot monitoring reports on the security situation and facilitates the delivery of humanitarian aid.<sup>13</sup> A separate OSCE observer mission at the Russian checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk (both within Russia) to monitor border crossings to and from eastern Ukraine ended on 30 September 2021 after Russia refused to support a renewal of its mandate.<sup>14</sup>

### **Russia's March–April 2021 military mobilization**

After being on a low simmer for months, the armed conflict in Donbas escalated again in March and April 2021 as Russian-backed rebels and Ukrainian government forces clashed, in violation of the July 2020 ceasefire agreement.<sup>15</sup> Tensions further increased in late March–early April as Russia deployed tens of thousands of additional troops along the border with Ukraine. The US European Command raised its watch level to ‘potential imminent crisis’ in response to the movement of Russian forces, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called on NATO to create an accelerated path for Ukrainian membership.<sup>16</sup> Russia said the troops on Ukraine’s border were engaged in military exercises and although the rationale for their presence was unclear, it was likely about geopolitical posturing

<sup>12</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Thematic Report, The Impact of Mines, Unexploded Ordnance and Other Explosive Objects on Civilians in the Conflict-Affected Regions of Eastern Ukraine, November 2019–March 2021* (OSCE: May 2021); and Flint, J., ‘As the threat of war looms in Eastern Ukraine, AOV examines the country’s landmine problem’, AOV, 7 Dec. 2021. On the impact of landmines see also chapter 13, section I, in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> For OSCE SMM daily and ad hoc reports on the crisis in Ukraine see <<https://www.osce.org/ukrainecrisis>>. For analysis of the SMM see Härtel, A., Pisarenko, A. and Umland, A., ‘The OSCE’s special monitoring mission to Ukraine’, *Security and Human Rights*, vol. 31, no. 1–4 (2021), pp. 121–54.

<sup>14</sup> OSCE, ‘Chairperson-in-Office expressed regret that no consensus could be reached on extension of mandate of Observer Mission’, 16 Sep. 2021. For further details on the SMM in Ukraine see chapter 2, section II, in this volume.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Kremlin urges France and Germany to stop Ukraine conflict crossing “dangerous line”’, Reuters, 4 Mar. 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Kramer, A. E., ‘Fighting escalates in Eastern Ukraine, signaling the end to another cease-fire’, *New York Times*, 30 Mar. 2021; Polityuk, P. and Soldatkin, V., ‘Ukraine calls for path into NATO after Russia masses troops’, Reuters, 6 Apr. 2021; and ‘A Russian military build-up on Ukraine’s border prompts alarm’, *The Economist*, 14 Apr. 2021.

rather than a potential prelude to invasion.<sup>17</sup> Although tensions were temporarily assuaged when Russia started to pull back its forces in late April, the situation in Donbas remained fraught.

### **Ukraine's proposed revisions to the peace process**

The 2015 Minsk II agreement ended the major fighting and set out steps for the conflict parties (Ukrainian government, separatist statelets and Russia) to take in order to bring about peace in Donbas.<sup>18</sup> These steps were meant to lead to the breakaway areas of Donetsk and Luhansk being reintegrated into Ukraine while offering them a measure of autonomy. In contrast to its policy toward Crimea, Russia officially recognized the areas controlled by separatists in eastern Ukraine as Ukrainian territory. Russian motives appeared to be for a Russian-friendly autonomous Donbas to remain in Ukraine, thereby securing continuing leverage over Ukraine's foreign and domestic policy. The local separatist leaders were already financially and politically obligated to Russia, and Russia had granted citizenship to more than 525 000 residents in separatist-controlled parts of eastern Ukraine.<sup>19</sup>

The peace process had stalled due to fundamental disagreements among the conflict parties about the nature of the conflict and their involvement in it, as well as the implementation of the Minsk agreements.<sup>20</sup> The core of the stalemate lay within the sequencing of some of Minsk II's key measures, which remained ambiguous. While Ukraine emphasized the need for a permanent ceasefire and withdrawal of Russian forces, both on principle and as a prerequisite for creating a secure environment to hold free and fair local elections in the separatist-controlled Donbas, Russia continued to deny a military presence and reject responsibility for ceasefire violations and the failure to withdraw heavy weapons. Russia also called on Ukraine, irrespective of the security environment, to fulfil certain political measures,

<sup>17</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Responding to the new crisis on Ukraine's borders', International Crisis Group Statement, 20 Apr. 2021; Isachenkov, V., 'Kremlin says it fears full-scale fighting in Ukraine's east', AP News, 9 Apr. 2021; and 'Ukraine rules out offensive against Russia-backed separatists', Al Jazeera, 9 Apr. 2021.

<sup>18</sup> 'Package of measures for the implementation of the Minsk agreements' (Minsk II Agreement), 12 Feb. 2015. See also '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.

<sup>19</sup> International Crisis Group, *Rebels Without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine*, Europe Report no. 254 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 16 July 2019); and 'Nearly 530,000 Donbass citizens receive Russian citizenship in simplified procedure', Tass, 2 May 2021.

<sup>20</sup> For developments in the peace process in 2019–20 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 126–28; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 134–36. For analysis on the Russian and Ukrainian positions on the Minsk agreements see International Crisis Group, 'Responding to Russia's new military buildup near Ukraine', Europe Briefing no. 92, 8 Dec. 2021, pp. 3–6.

including granting permanent special status to the separatist-controlled areas and related constitutional reforms.

In April 2021 President Zelensky called for the Minsk II agreement to be revised through new negotiations within an expanded Normandy Format (an informal forum established by France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine in 2014) that would include Canada, the United Kingdom and the USA. He also reiterated that Ukraine was not bound to offer permanent (as opposed to temporary) autonomy to Donbas. Russia refused to open talks on this basis.<sup>21</sup>

On 23 August 2021, the eve of the 30th anniversary of Ukraine's independence, an inaugural Crimea Platform summit was organized by President Zelensky in Kyiv. Designed as an international coordination mechanism aimed at reinforcing the message that the 2014 annexation of Crimea would never be accepted, the summit was attended by representatives from 46 countries and international organizations.<sup>22</sup>

### **Russia's November–December military mobilization**

In November Russia once again deployed thousands of troops near its borders with Ukraine, having only partially pulled back its forces from the April build-up. According to Ukrainian and Western officials about 100 000 Russian troops, along with military equipment, were deployed in proximity to the Ukrainian border.<sup>23</sup> The troop build-up was characterized by one US official as 'much larger and on a much more lethal scale' than that preceding the annexation of Crimea in 2014, while a US intelligence assessment suggested that Russia could begin an offensive involving up to 175 000 troops staged at different points along the border with Ukraine in early 2022.<sup>24</sup> NATO, the USA and other member states expressed grave concern, warning Moscow against a military operation against Ukraine.<sup>25</sup> Russian officials continued to deny that its troops posed any threat to Ukraine, and instead accused Ukraine

<sup>21</sup> Hall, B., 'Ukrainian leader calls for revamp of peace process to end Donbas war', *Financial Times*, 26 Apr. 2021; and Hall, B. and Olearchyk, R., 'Zelensky forced to "face reality" over peace talks with Russia', *Financial Times*, 3 May 2021. On the Normandy Format see Wintour, P., 'Ukraine tensions: What is the Normandy format and has it achieved anything?', *The Guardian*, 26 Jan. 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Socor, V., 'Crimea platform: Ukraine's initiative to raise the costs of Russia's occupation', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 18, no. 25 (15 Feb. 2021); and Yavuz, T., 'Crimean platform summit reaffirms support for Ukraine', Anadolu Agency, 24 Aug. 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Schwirtz, M. and Reinhard, S., 'How Russia's military is positioned to threaten Ukraine', *New York Times*, 7 Jan. 2022; and Roth, A., Blood, D. and de Hoog, N., 'Russia–Ukraine crisis: Where are Putin's troops and what are his options?', *The Guardian*, 17 Dec. 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Gaouette, N., Hansler, J. and Atwood, K., 'Russian military capacity on Ukraine's border is on a "more lethal scale" than 2014 Crimea invasion, US official says', CNN, 8 Dec. 2021; and Harris, S. and Sonne, P., 'Russia planning massive military offensive against Ukraine involving 175,000 troops, US intelligence warns', *Washington Post*, 3 Dec. 2021.

<sup>25</sup> NATO, 'Statement by the North Atlantic Council on the situation in and around Ukraine', Press Release 189 (2021), 16 Dec. 2021; and Maynes, C., 'US and Russian officials have agreed to discuss Ukraine tensions and role of NATO', NPR, 25 Dec. 2021.

and Western states of ‘provocations’.<sup>26</sup> The situation was clouded by a lack of Russian transparency and conflicting assessments of the crisis.<sup>27</sup>

During a video call on 7 December 2021, President Biden warned President Putin that the USA and its allies would meet a military invasion of Ukraine with strong economic penalties, moves to bolster Ukrainian defences, and the fortifying of support for NATO member states in Eastern Europe.<sup>28</sup> A similar warning to Russia was issued by the G7 group on 12 December, calling on the country to ‘de-escalate, pursue diplomatic channels, and abide by its international commitments on transparency of military activities’.<sup>29</sup> In another telephone conversation on 30 December 2021, Biden and Putin restated their positions. Despite failing to reach agreement on defusing tensions, the exchange set the scene for further diplomatic talks between the USA and Russia in January 2022 (see section I).<sup>30</sup>

## Outlook

At the end of 2021 concerns about the fresh build-up of Russian forces on Ukraine’s border prompted grave concerns about the potential for escalation, even to the point of full-blown interstate war. Russia’s motives and objectives were not entirely clear, and in all probability intentionally ambiguous. However, Russia appeared to be using the threat of invasion to achieve a more acquiescent Ukraine and extensive changes in the European security order (as discussed in section I), as well as to project strength to a domestic audience.<sup>31</sup> While negotiations due to take place in January 2022 seemed unlikely to reach any initial agreement, it was hoped that the talks might lead to more substantive and sustained diplomacy. In the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, Western leaders were discussing economic sanctions on Russia and greater defensive support for Ukraine rather than a direct military response. Nonetheless, the risk of a wider escalation remained a real possibility. On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>26</sup> ‘Attempts to solve Ukrainian crisis by force will trigger serious consequences—Kremlin’, Tass, 21 Nov. 2021; and ‘Russia says Ukraine has deployed half its army to Donbass conflict zone’, Reuters, 1 Dec. 2021.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Kyiv seeks to align its forces in information warfare’, Intelligence Online, 10 Jan. 2022; and ‘The information warfare between Kyiv and Moscow reaches fever pitch’, Intelligence Online, 29 Nov. 2021.

<sup>28</sup> White House, ‘Readout of President Biden’s video call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia’, 7 Dec. 2021; and Roth, A., ‘Biden promises eastern Europeans support in event of Russian attack on Ukraine’, *The Guardian*, 9 Dec. 2021.

<sup>29</sup> US Department of State, ‘G7 Foreign Ministers’ Statement on Russia and Ukraine’, 12 Dec. 2021.

<sup>30</sup> White House, ‘Statement by Press Secretary Jen Psaki on President Biden’s phone call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia’, 30 Dec. 2021; and Renshaw, J. and Soldatkin, V., ‘“Serious” talk between Biden and Putin sets the stage for diplomacy’, Reuters, 31 Dec. 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Roth, A., ‘Vladimir Putin passes law that may keep him in office until 2036’, *The Guardian*, 5 Apr. 2021.

<sup>32</sup> On the Russian invasion of Ukraine see chapter 1, section I, in this volume.