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The Silence of the Guns: Can the Cease-Fire in Donbass Last?

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For the first time since the outbreak of the war in Donbass, the situation on the frontline is nearly a proper cease-fire. This is the outcome of the interplay of three factors: the political-military balance in Donbass, sanctions and Russia's military intervention in Syria. Nevertheless, it is premature to assume that military options in Donbass are no longer in the cards. Russia is likely to use force if needed to repel a Ukrainian attempt to retake parts of the area, to obstruct the Minsk process if it goes in a disadvantageous direction for Moscow, or to seize more territory if there is further political and social turmoil in Ukraine. To minimise the risks of an eruption of violence in Donbass, the EU and U.S. should prolong the sanctions, fine-tune the diplomatic pressure on both sides to implement and uphold the Minsk Protocols, and pay more attention to the political and economic transformations in the rest of Ukraine.

Nearly a Cease-Fire

Since the outbreak of hostilities in Donbass in spring 2014, more than 6,800 people have been killed, around 17,000 wounded and nearly 2.5 million forced to leave their homes, looking for safety in other parts of Ukraine controlled by the central authorities or seeking refuge abroad (in Russia, Belarus, Moldova, Poland, Hungary or Romania).² There were several attempts to enact unilateral or to negotiate and implement mutually an overwhelming cease-fire. On 20 June 2014, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko declared a unilateral 10-day cease-fire. On 5 September 2014, representatives of Ukraine, Russia, OSCE and the separatist republics³ signed the Minsk Protocols, which should have served as a basis for suspension of military actions in Donbass. Another attempt to stop the violence was made on 12 February 2015, when an additional agreement nicknamed "Minsk II" was hammered out after 16 hours of marathon negotiations. But up until summer 2015 all efforts to stop fighting in Donbass failed. Instead of a proper cease-fire, the situation in the Donbass oscillated between periods of skirmish and violent outbursts of war (e.g., the escalation of fighting for the remainder of the Donetsk airport in January 2015).

Only a year after the Minsk Protocols were signed, the situation along the front lines has reached something that closely resembles a cease-fire. In September 2015, both sides confirmed the lowest levels of

¹ The author is grateful to all the experts who read and commented on early drafts of this paper.

² "ECHO Fact Sheet," European Commission, October 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/ukraine_en.pdf.

³ "Luhansk Peoples' Republic" and "Donetsk Peoples' Republic."

violence since the outbreak of the conflict. The same month, OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) mediated agreement on a two-phase withdrawal of heavy weapons of a calibre less than 100 mm to 15 km from the line of engagement. The sides would first withdraw tanks, and then later artillery and last, mortars. The process was to take 41 days. The first phase, conducted along the line of engagement in the Luhansk region (northern sector) was almost finalised as of 18 October.⁴ The second stage should take place on the front line in the Donetsk region (southern sector). If carried out without major delays by either side, all affected weapons should be withdrawn by 12 November.

Throughout September and October 2015, the sides engaged in sporadic use of small arms and grenades. There are still casualties reported, though fewer than before, and mostly as a result of explosive booby traps or engagements with groups on diversionary missions. Nevertheless, there has been no heavy fighting and a near cease-fire has held since then, with both sides in the conflict continuing to slowly withdraw heavy weapons to gradually create a 30 km wide buffer zone. The question that arises in this regard is why did the violence subside in September 2015 enough to allow the temporary truce to take effect in the conflict ridden regions of Ukraine?

Why Now?

The current cease-fire in Donbass is the outcome of the interplay of three key factors: a military equilibrium on the ground, the sanctions against Russia, and the Syrian civil war.

Military-Political Balance

By the end of summer 2015, Ukraine's armed forces, on the one hand, and Russia's troops together with Russian-backed militias, on the other hand, achieved balance in Donbass. In the aftermath of its last defeat at Debaltseve in February 2015, Ukraine surged its military personnel in the war zone from 21,000 to over 64,000.⁵ In parallel, Ukraine has been investing in fortification on its defence line, building up to 300 strongholds in Donbass. The number of Russian regular troops (nearly 9,000) and militia personnel (around 34,000) in Donbass has been relatively constant.⁶ Given this distribution of forces in Donbass, both sides are capable of keeping each other in a deadlock but are not in a position to break through the other's defences.

The last serious reality check of the respective military capacities was the separatists' assault on Marinka in June 2015, which was timely repelled by Ukrainian forces. The battle for Marinka demonstrated the improved capacities of Ukrainian artillery. A modified version of Q36 anti-battery radar, which the U.S. will start supplying in mid-November to Ukraine is likely to further minimise casualties among Ukrainian ground troops in case the fighting resumes and should increase Ukraine's capacity to suppress enemy artillery. The attack on Marinka, though, also revealed that the military balance in Donbass is the outcome of political equilibrium, too.

Overall, Russia still has a superior army to Ukraine and has stationed between 40,000 and 50,000 troops along Ukraine's border, ready to intervene if needed.⁷ Should Russia decide to escalate the conflict significantly and send in more troops backed by air forces, Ukraine will hardly be able to hold onto its current defensive line in Donbass. In Marinka, Russia had hoped to break Ukraine's defence by sending militias rather than regular Russian troops. After observing the improved fighting capacity of Ukraine's army, Russia has tried to minimise casualties on its side. After six waves of mobilisation in Ukraine between

⁴ "OBSE zavershila verifikatsiu otvedonnogo oruzhia na Luganschine," *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, 19 October 2015, www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2015/10/19/7085360.

⁵ "V nastoyashie vremya z zone ATO nakhodyatsea svishhe 64 tysyach voenosluzhashih VSU," *Unian*, 12 July 2015, www.unian.net/politics/1099882-v-nastoyaschee-vremya-v-zone-ato-nahodyatsya-svyishe-64-tyis-voennoslujaschih-vsu-poroshenko.html.

⁶ A. Nathan, "Ukraine fears 'big war' as Russia sends in more troops," *Independent*, 16 August 2015, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-fears-big-war-as-russia-sends-in-more-troops-10457571.html.

⁷ "Russia masses 54,000 troops in Donbass and on Ukraine border," *Ukraine Today*, 26 June 2015, <http://uatoday.tv/news/russia-masses-54-000-troops-in-donbas-and-on-ukraine-border-ato-headquarters-446163.html>.

2014 and 2015, Moscow is also aware of the number of reservists Ukraine can call on to relatively quickly fill any gaps (including veterans of its “Anti-Terrorist Operation,” or ATO). Russia also has reinforcements but is reluctant to commit more military personnel in Donbass to a renewed offensive. It is concerned with potential fallout back home of a growing number of casualties, which would be very difficult to conceal even in Russia’s hermetical political system. Moreover, fighting on a much bigger scale in Donbass is likely to provoke a new round of sanctions, which Russia’s economy might not stomach. With these calculations in mind, the Kremlin probably assumed that for the next several months, political tools might better serve its agenda in Ukraine than military ones. Russia put to use the Minsk process to leverage Donbass against the fragile political and economic context in Ukraine. To tack the Minsk process in a favourable direction, Russia needs the guns to be silent, at least for now.

The Sanctions Factor

Sanctions, in unexpected synergy with a decline in energy prices, have undercut Russia’s economic growth rates (projected to be down 3.8% of GDP in 2015) and dangerously depleted its financial reserves held in sovereign funds for times of trouble. According to the IMF, the sanctions and Russia’s counter-measures against the West have cost Russia 1.5% of GDP. Over next few years, the IMF anticipates that the sanctions could erase another 9% of Russia’s GDP.⁸ Thus, the impact of the sanctions is not negligible for Russia and its political regime. With declining budget revenues and a soaring budget deficit (from 1% of GDP in 2014 to an estimated 3% of GDP in 2016), the Kremlin will increasingly rely on two sovereign funds (National Wealth Fund and Reserve Fund), which totalled \$144 billion as of October 2015. However, the Russian authorities anticipate if current trends persist, domestic resources will be enough to cover the holes in the budget till 2017.⁹ A prolonged economic recession risks not only a downgrade in popular support for President Vladimir Putin but also an erosion of consensus on him among the elites. Without its reserves, the Kremlin will need to seek overseas financial support for the first time in a decade. For Putin, this would signal a return to the derided 1990s when Russia heavily relied on external financial assistance to keep its economy afloat.

Although Russia still can weather the economic storm in 2016 and partially in 2017, the Kremlin aims to remove external barriers to economic growth to try to prevent a deeper recession. Moscow has worked hard (via lobbying, new energy deals, and misinformation) to soften or remove the sanctions, which would send a slightly positive signal to international markets and help its economy muddle through beyond 2016 too. The most painful sanctions for Russia are the sectoral ones introduced by the EU. They are set to expire in January 2016 and are up for review in late 2015. In this context, Russia will try to sell its cease-fire in Donbass, along with the postponement of local “fake elections” in the so-called “peoples’ republics” as serious milestones that merit, if not total, at least partial softening of the sectoral sanctions. At the same time, the Kremlin will play a blame game to shift responsibility for the eventual non-implementation of the Minsk Protocols on the authorities in Kyiv. This has already started. During a meeting with foreign business people, Putin accused Ukraine of not being able to deliver on the Minsk agreements, stating that “the overwhelming majority [of problems in Donbass] does not lie in our domain.”¹⁰

The expectation in the Kremlin is that once the EU lifts or eases the sanctions, it will be difficult to reassemble the intra-EU consensus necessary to re-impose or re-strengthen them in case Russia violates the Minsk Protocols. Russia hopes that the refugee crisis now hitting Europe and the potentially deep political effects of it among the EU Member States (e.g., rise of anti-immigrant sentiments and far-right parties) will ultimately outweigh any concerns for the peace process in Ukraine.

⁸ J. Bush, “IMF says Western sanctions could cut 9 pct off Russia’s GDP,” *Reuters*, 3 August 2015, www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/03/russia-economy-imf-idUSL9N0OK04620150803.

⁹ “Minfin ne iskliuchil ischerpania rezervnykh fondov v 2017,” *Forbes.ru*, 9 October 2015, www.forbes.ru/news/302511-minfin-ne-isklyuchil-ischerpaniya-rezervnykh-fondov-v-2017-godu.

¹⁰ “V. Putin speech and Q. & A. session at Russia Calling! Investment Forum,” 13 October 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50498>.

War in Syria

On 30 September 2015, Russia launched its first airstrikes in Syria. Its first projection of military force outside the post-Soviet region in 25 years is part of a multidimensional foreign policy agenda. In the equation, Ukraine is not a minor figure. For the Russian domestic audience, Syria provides a public bored after a year and a half with the Ukraine “soap-opera” and feeling the heat of the economic crisis with a new story.¹¹ The way TV channels, the main source of information for Russian citizens, covered Russia’s airstrikes indicates a well-prepared information campaign. The audience was not only informed about the increasing number of daily strikes and targets annihilated, but also was shown how missiles are launched or hit targets as well as routines on Russia’s military base in Latakia.¹² While capturing the population’s attention and beefing up feelings of pride in the new look of the Russian military,¹³ the campaign in Syria conveniently hid the military failure of Russia’s Novorossyia project in Ukraine (which aimed to carve out the east and south of Ukraine) and deflects attention from the current military deadlock in Donbass.

Russia’s operation in Syria also targets the European public and governments. European mass media widely reflected on the increasing flows of refugees from Syria to Europe (amounting to 53% of all refugees arriving via the Mediterranean Sea as of October 2015). The EU has struggled to devise a joint approach to tackle the problem of absorbing those who reach Europe’s shores and to reducing the numbers of new arrivals. In this context, the Syrian forces’ October 2015 offensive on several rebel strongholds, backed by Russian air cover, is likely to displace more people from their homes, exacerbating the refugee crisis in Europe. UN agencies report that the Syrian forces’ renewed advance on Aleppo displaced from nearby villages some 35,000 people in just several days.¹⁴ The Russian move seeks to shift Europe’s attention from Ukraine to Syria. The shift is not limited to European media but also extends to European governments. Playing the refugee crisis card, Russia aims to undermine public opinion of government in key EU Member States, which could in turn weaken their principled stance on Ukraine. In this case, as members of the Normandy format charged with finding a solution to the conflict in Ukraine and crucial actors in enforcing the sanctions, the German and French governments are the main targets of the Russian campaign.

Russia expects that under the impact of the refugee crisis the EU will be more susceptible to relaxing some caveats under which the Minsk Protocols are implemented (e.g., standards for “elections” in Donbass). To secure Russian cooperation in Syria, even though vague, the Kremlin expects the EU to be more inclined to remove the Ukraine-related sanctions. Apparently, Russia’s calculations are not entirely groundless. The stance that it is not possible to ask Russia to cooperate in Syria while keeping the sanctions in place¹⁵ is not limited to a few representatives of mainstream political parties in Germany but reflects a strong, although not yet vociferous, current of opinion across Europe. To feed this perspective, Russia inflames the war in Syria but maintains the cease-fire in Donbass. Besides the tactical calculations in its relations with the EU, Russia is apparently trying to avoid fighting two wars at once.

Did Russia Give Up on Military Options in Ukraine?

In the last several months, Russia has shown signs of winding down its operations in Donbass. Besides fortifying the border of Russia’s Rostov region with neighbouring Donbass, the Kremlin has devised various approaches to deal with fighters who return to Russia. For instance, the authorities keep an eye on former combatants, who often experience difficulty as they re-enter peaceful life. For this purpose, the “Union of

¹¹ I. Davydov, “Po doroghe v Dambassk,” *Newtimes*, 15 October 2015, www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/102409.

¹² See, for example: “Minoborony opublikoval video o budniyakh pilotov v Sirii,” *Rosbalt*, 22 October 2015, www.rosbalt.ru/video/2015/10/22/1453685.html; “Rossiskie vertoloty protiv IGIL,” *Gazeta.ru*, 6 October 2015, www.gazeta.ru/politics/photo/rossiiskie_vertoloty_protiv_igil.shtml; “Kak sluzhat rossiiskie voennye v Sirii,” *Gazeta.ru*, 2 October 2015, www.gazeta.ru/social/photo/kak_sluzhat_rossiiskie_voennye_v_sirii.shtml.

¹³ M. Bodner, “One-Third of Russians Think Russian Military Is World’s Best,” *The Moscow Times*, 16 October 2015, www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/one-third-of-russians-think-russian-military-is-worlds-best/539295.html.

¹⁴ “35,000 Syrians Displaced in Fighting Near Aleppo,” *UNDP.org*, 19 October 2015, <http://www.undpi.org/World-News/UN-35000-Syrians-Displaced-in-Fighting-Near-Aleppo.html>.

¹⁵ S. Nicola, “Germany Seeks Better Russia Ties to Help Solve Syria Crisis,” *Bloomberg*, 25 September 2015, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-09-25/germany-seeks-better-russia-ties-to-help-solve-syria-crisis.

Donbass Volunteers” was hastily created and held its first gathering on 10 October 2015 in Moscow. Apparently, however, the Kremlin has decided the best option is to lock up or reroute this violent potential. Thus, human rights activists in Russia report instances when participants of the war in Donbass, on their way home, have been arrested for illegal possession of firearms.¹⁶ There is also evidence of recruitment for the Syrian war among the former combatants in Donbass.¹⁷ Even the army of paid online trolls who attempted to provide cover for Russia’s operation in Crimea and later Donbass has eased the information war against Ukraine and focused instead on the new mission—Syria.¹⁸ All these factors, coupled to the current cease-fire gives the impression that Russia has given up in the short term on military options in Ukraine. But the picture might be deceiving.

The weapons in Donbass have been withdrawn only 15 km from the front and easily can be re-deployed. Moreover, OSCE reports numerous instances when Russia and its backed militias have violated terms of the weapons withdrawal or have electronically jammed monitoring activity of OSCE drones flying over Donbass.¹⁹ Russia seems intent on keeping the weapons as close as possible to the engagement line in case it wants to launch a surprise attack. There is no peacekeeping force that would serve as a buffer between the warring parties to prevent or at least minimise the probability of a reactivation of hostilities. At the same time, there has been no observed reduction of Russian regular troops in Donbass or along Ukraine’s border. On the contrary, Russia is building permanent or upgrading military facilities in proximity to Ukraine in Russia’s Belgorod and Voronezh regions (which when finished could house between 3,500 and 5,000 soldiers each).²⁰ Despite Belarus President Alexander Lukashenka’s vehement opposition, Moscow is pushing to establish a new military foothold in 2016 in eastern Belarus (Babruysk). The move is aimed at Ukraine rather than directly at NATO. Last, but not least, Russia has not lost rediscovered a taste for military action. The airstrikes in Syria are vivid proof of the militarisation of Russian foreign policy. Hence, the silence in Donbass may be equally interpreted as a mere pause before the storm. Given these facts, it can be useful to explore under which circumstances Russia might resort in the short or mid-term to the use of force in Ukraine.

“Operation Storm” in Donbass

One of the ideas behind the ATO mission in eastern Ukraine was to prevent the separatist militias from entrenching in populated areas and to displace them quickly from any localities they seized. In August 2014, however, by defeating the Ukrainian forces at Ilovaisk, Russia drew a red line. The Kremlin will not let Ukraine recover by force parts of Donbass that Kyiv does not control. Should Ukraine try again to recover lost territories, Russia will very likely use force to repel the attack and might speculate on the occasion about whether its forces might occupy even more Ukrainian territory. Besides self-ascribed reputational imperatives to protect the “Russian World,” the Kremlin will not give up easily on this leverage (in this case, the separatist republics) after having invested so much diplomatic, military and financial resources. A Ukrainian attack to recover territory would, to the Kremlin, vindicate its use of force against Ukraine on a much bigger scale. Similar to the 2008 war in Georgia, Moscow would reactivate a “genocide” narrative to legitimise its actions in Ukraine. Public constraints regarding casualties would ease as Moscow argues that it has to protect Russian-speakers from “aggressive nationalists” in Kyiv. Ukraine’s attempt to re-establish by force control over parts of Donbass will not have the support of the EU or U.S., who have to deal with multiple crises in the Middle East and North Africa as well as a more assertive China. If Ukraine tries to

¹⁶ Remarks by Russian human rights activist during a debate, September 2015.

¹⁷ V. Vashenko, “Dobrovoltsy hotyat v Siriu,” *Gazeta.ru*, 14 October 2015, www.gazeta.ru/social/2015/10/14/7821119.shtml.

¹⁸ I. Klishin, “Boty ushli na front. Kak internet-trolli pomeniali taktiku iz-za Sirii,” *Slon*, 13 October 2015, <https://slon.ru/posts/57917>.

¹⁹ “Boeviki narushaiut opredelonnnye linii otvoda vooruzheniya,” *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, 12 October 2015, www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2015/10/12/7084648; “Latest from OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine based on information received as of 2 October 2015,” OSCE, 3 October 2015, www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/189266.

²⁰ A. Zverev, “Russia building major military base near Ukrainian border,” *Reuters*, 9 September 2015, www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/09/us-ukraine-crisis-exclusive-idUSKCN0R924G20150909; A. Zverev, “Russia plans second big military base near Ukrainian border,” *Reuters*, 23 September 2015, www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/23/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-base-idUSKCNORN1P120150923.

recover territory and Russia counter-attacks and then advances deeper into Ukraine, Kyiv risks finding itself one-on-one with Moscow.

In the public debate in Ukraine, the Minsk process is associated with a path to a dysfunctional Bosnia-Herzegovina model.²¹ On the other hand, there are some who take inspiration from Croatia's approach to the separatist republic of Serbian Krajina, which was dismantled in the swift *Operation Storm* in August 1995.²² Still, the prevailing mood in Kyiv, shaped by its defeats at Ilovaisk and Debaltseve, is that Ukraine cannot afford to try an *Operation Storm* in Donbass. Russia has built air-defences in Donbass and has enough ground capabilities (which can be rapidly reinforced) to offset Ukraine's *blitzkrieg*. At the same time, while Ukraine's army is in much better shape than it was in 2014, it is still in defence-mode and is not offensive-prone, the latter requiring improved communication, excellent coordination of different types of forces and enhanced capacity to rapidly deploy and manoeuvre with forces. Equally, decision-makers in Kyiv are aware that such an operation would risk undermining the EU and U.S. support for Ukraine needed to modernise its economy and armed forces. For these reasons, such an operation in Donbass in the short and mid-term is improbable. However, if Russia becomes seriously bogged down in the Syrian conflict and is simultaneously forced to intervene in Tajikistan to stop threats from Afghanistan, the number of voices in Kyiv calling for the government to act in Donbass might increase. However, Russia's Afghanistan syndrome (the sense of loss, even diluted after 25 years) will restrain it from sending ground troops into Syria, and the continuous U.S. military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2016 (at around 5,500 troops) will minimise the risk that security threats will spill over to Central Asia.

Minsk Process Goes in the "Wrong" Direction

From Russia's vantage point, the Minsk process, in the best-case scenario, should legalise and empower (via constitutional amendments) the Russian-backed separatists inside Ukraine. In other words, "Kremlin strives to integrate Ukraine in Donbass and not the other way around."²³ At the same time, Russia's minimal agenda aims to use the Minsk process to destabilise Ukraine (e.g., fuel resistance to constitutional changes and political conflict) and/or keep its elites busy with futile negotiations on Donbass instead of implementing reforms. However, in case the Minsk process goes in the wrong direction from Russia's perspective, the Kremlin is ready to re-escalate the conflict (though below a threshold that results in new sanctions) to force the sides to re-discuss the basics, namely how to restore a cease-fire and withdraw heavy weapons. Therefore, Russia will resist the peaceful re-integration of Donbass, too, if it does not meet the Kremlin's objectives. In this case, the situation will resemble a "hot frozen conflict" characterised by occasional low-intensity violence and a blocked settlement mechanism.

Judging the situation in Donbass through a prism of other conflicts in the post-Soviet region, one disadvantage for Russia would be if central authorities were to establish direct contacts in negotiations with the separatists, sidelining Moscow. For instance, in 2012 after the power rotation in Transnistria ("presidential elections" in late 2011) and promising engagement between Chisinau and Tiraspol, the Kremlin worked hard to disrupt this process. Although Russia insists that Kyiv engage directly with Donetsk and Luhansk, it seeks to legitimise the separatist entities and portray itself as mediator and not part of the conflict. As long as the leadership of the breakaway republics take orders from Moscow, Russia wants a direct dialogue between them and Kyiv. Russia's military presence in the separatist enclaves is explained as not only a deterrent against Ukraine but also a guarantee that local elites will remain in line with Moscow. Should Ukraine try to engage the public in the east or the "local authorities" in Donetsk and Luhansk to seek a viable and sustainable solution, Russia will chip away at any prospects for progress in the early stages by re-escalation or provocations on the front lines.

²¹ S. Rakhmanin, "Shtoby ne bylo muchitelno bolino," *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 10 July 2015, http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/chtoby-ne-bylo-muchitelno-bolno-_.html.

²² Iu. Butusov, "Voyna-2015," *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 15 May 2015, http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/voyna-2015-_.html.

²³ An expert's observation during a closed debate, October 2015.

Turmoil in Ukraine

One of the potentially perverse effects of a proper cease-fire on domestic politics in Ukraine could be a much weaker governing coalition. With a perceived diminished external threat and still turbulent economic situation (the country's GDP is estimated to fall by 12% in 2015), coalition infighting and blame-games risk erupting with new energy. Instead of relying on military force, Russia will activate corrupt links within the political class in Ukraine to regain influence on the decision-making process. Not surprisingly, Yulia Tymoshenko, who is on the rise in opinion polls (from 6% to 15%, closing the gap with the pro-president BPP, which is at 20%),²⁴ has become the new darling of Russian mass media.²⁵ Her comments to Ukrainian mass media (e.g., criticising rising tariffs on gas) are duly translated and aired on Russian TV. The former Party of Regions has re-grouped around the parties Opposition Block and Revival. While Opposition Block has been steadily gaining in public opinion surveys (from 9% to 14% in one year), Revival has been increasing its influence on the local level (e.g., winning the outright majority on Kharkiv's city council). Russia's hope is to upset the distribution of forces in the Verkhovna Rada. Thus, Moscow will support political forces that aim to dissolve the governing coalition and will strive to provoke early elections. For the Kremlin, the ultimate prize is not Donbass, but all of Ukraine strongly anchored in its sphere of influence.

As long as political means provide Russia what it craves in Ukraine, military force will be restrained. However, if the chaotic politics in Ukraine descend into a power vacuum, provoke weakening of state institutions or trigger political or social turmoil (fed by worsening economic conditions or adoption of constitutional amendments on Donbass), Russia might be tempted, as in February 2014, to use the window of opportunity to apply force again, this time to effectively split Ukraine. It may do so in particular if the Syria story becomes exhausted and Russia winds down operations there, then a switch to Ukraine again would be a welcoming move in the Kremlin.

There are some preconditions for turmoil scenario. Because of the conflict in Donbass, the number of arms circulating illegally in Ukraine has increased. A shootout in Mukachevo (July 2015) involving grenade launchers, which destroyed two police cars, speaks volumes. At the same time, the vote on constitutional changes on 31 August 2015 and violent incidents in front of parliament (a grenade explosion that killed one policeman), show how easily controversial political issues coupled with illegal possession of arms can spark unrest. ATO veterans can be mobilised and manipulated as well in this political power struggle. In a worst-case scenario, some military units deployed on the front line, could decide to march to Kyiv to restore order and hold responsible those who betrayed the ideals of the "Revolution of Dignity." While the prospect of such developments are not very high, they cannot be totally ruled out. Ukraine is still in search of equilibrium between the state and society and that makes it vulnerable to renewed conflict between the government and its citizens. But with memories still fresh of Maidan and the annexation of Crimea, the government in Kyiv has a decent chance of avoiding stepping on the same rakes twice.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The scenarios painted here are not perfect pictures of the future. Politics rarely follow analytical designs and schemes. Still, this prospective exercise helps to warn of the potential risks and need to avoid mistakes. Given Russia's recent propensity to use force in order to achieve its foreign policy goals, the EU and the U.S. should take steps to minimise the risks of military scenarios in Ukraine.

First, the sanctions must be maintained as an instrument to undercut Russia's power asymmetry in its relations with Ukraine. This should serve as respite for Ukraine to get stronger from the inside. Once the sanctions are removed or softened, it will be difficult for the EU to muster new consensus behind restoring the sanctions if the situation in Ukraine demands it. Also noteworthy is that the EU's sectoral sanctions were enacted in 2014 only after the extraordinary event in Donbass of the shooting down of Flight MH17,

²⁴ "Za posledniy god reitinghi vyrosli tolko u Tymoshenko i byvshikh regionalov," *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 19 October 2015, http://zn.ua/POLITICS/za-posledniy-god-reytingi-vyrosli-tolko-u-partii-tymoshenko-i-byvshih-regionalov-192457_.html.

²⁵ See: A. Linnik, "Ukraine grozit renessans Timoshenko," *Gazeta.ru*, 18 October 2015, www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/10/18_a_7828391.shtml.

which reverberated throughout European public opinion. The softening of the sectoral sanctions without Russia abiding fully to the commitments of the Minsk Protocols would undermine, in the Kremlin's eyes, the use of sanctions as an EU foreign policy instrument. It also will increase the probability of a new wave of hostilities in Donbass.

Second, there must be more finely tuned diplomatic pressure exercised on Ukraine and Russia to deliver on Minsk commitments. An excessive push on Ukraine without demands that Russia simultaneously fulfil the obligations it assumed under the same document would be counterproductive. An overdose of pressure on Ukraine could wreak havoc on the ruling coalition in Kyiv (e.g., adoption of constitutional changes related to Donbass), triggering a much deeper crisis. Moreover, signals of readiness to compromise with Russia over Ukraine is unlikely to secure Moscow's cooperation in Syria, where it yearns for a protracted conflict to keep the 2,000 to 3,000 rebels originating from the North Caucasus busy far from Russia. On the contrary, an eagerness to strike a deal with Russia over Ukraine (accepting an imperfect and incomplete implementation of Minsk II) would embolden the Kremlin to bully not only its post-Soviet neighbours but also EU Member States in its vicinity.

Third, instead of over-focusing on solving the conflict in Donbass, a process Russia is likely to sabotage, the EU and U.S. should pay more attention to and support domestic reforms in the rest of Ukraine. Consolidated state institutions, decentralised local governance, reformed justice and energy sectors, an open, vibrant economy and strong defensive capabilities will shape Ukraine into a state that is less appealing and prohibitively costly for Russian military aggression.