Russia's Instrumentalisation of Conflict in Eastern Europe
– the Anatomy of the Protracted Conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova

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Executive Summary

The protracted conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are vehicles for Russia to establish and maintain a sphere of influence over its neighbouring countries and to prevent their NATO and/or EU integration. Russia's behaviour violates international law and the European security order, based on OSCE principles and commitments, incl. principles of sovereignty,territorial integrity,and the right of each country to choses its own security arrangements. These conflicts therefore have implications for European security at large and its normative basis.

Underlying this is a desire to thwart the spread of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which is seen as an existential threat. Combined, these goals amount to an attempt to renegotiate the European security order.

Russia instrumentalises conflict through its military forces in various forms alongside efforts to establish "de facto authorities" as legitimate conflict parties, and through "passportisation", propaganda and other hybrid measures.

At the same time, Russia refuses to acknowledge its role as a party to any of the conflicts and instrumentalises also conflict resolution processes established through Russian military force. It has repeatedly secured roles for itself as mediator or facilitator and provider of "peacekeeping forces", while restricting other international field presence. The conflict solving mechanisms and the negotiation formats constitute the real battlefield for Russia to achieve its goals.

The international community has largely played along with these charades, motivated by a wish to end hostilities and avoid further escalation. However, it must start holding Russia fully accountable for its violations, and in the case of Ukraine also for its broken promises related to the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Failing to do so not only risks making the violations permanent, but also erodes the European security order and increases the likelihood of further transgressions.

The foundation for such a policy of full accountability is strategic patience, as well as intra-EU and transatlantic unity. There can be no "business as usual" until Russia respects the commonly agreed rules. In parallel, the affected states need to be supported in their efforts at conflict resolution in line with the European security order, and also with their democratic and economic development.

Among other things, this calls for an evaluation of existing formats and processes for conflict resolution, as well as of the standard language used in the conflict contexts. Alternative approaches should be considered, including in the form of additional, more substantial sanctions.

Introduction

In Eastern Europe, protracted conflicts are being played out in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova (as well as, in a somewhat different setting, Azerbaijan). These conflicts are often referred to as "frozen", but this can be misleading since they never fully froze, either on the ground or politically. They also remain sources of suffering, particularly in eastern Ukraine, where people continue to die, get wounded or become victims of human rights violations almost daily.[1] Moreover, millions of people remain displaced.

The conflicts differ significantly in their history and nature, but they also have striking similarities. Most importantly, they are characterised by Russia's perpetuation or even instigation of conflict in order to achieve political goals, primarily to secure its influence and prevent the three states from integrating with NATO and/or the EU.

This Russian instrumentalisation of conflict is based on a paradoxical illusion. On the one hand, it is clear that Russia militarily and otherwise is undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, thereby violating the normative and legal foundations of the European security order as defined in international law, the OSCE acquis (the Helsinki Final Act,[2] the Charter of Paris[3] and other OSCE commitments) and the obligations of the Council of Europe. This is most blatantly the case in Ukraine, where Russia in 2014 launched an unprovoked military intervention and illegally annexed the Crimean peninsula. It thereby manifestly violated not only the above-mentioned international acts, but also a number of multilateral and bilateral agreements, such as the 1991 Belovezha agreement on the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the 2003 and 2010 Russian-Ukrainian treaties on the common border and Russia's Black Sea Fleet, respectively. It is a similar story with the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which Russia promised to respect Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and existing borders in return for Kyiv handing over the Soviet-made nuclear weapons on its territory.[4] Through its military intervention, Russia also acted contrary to the spirit and arguably also the letter of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and sent a dangerous signal to states considering abandoning their nuclear weapon programmes.

On the other hand, and in spite of all the obvious transgressions, Russia refuses to acknowledge its role as a party to any of the conflicts. Through the use and threat of force, the Russian veto power in the UN Security Council and the de facto consensus requirement within the OSCE, Moscow is instrumentalising also conflict resolution processes and attempting to prevent any conflict resolution on terms other than its own. Russia has repeatedly secured official roles for itself as a provider of "peacekeeping forces" and as a mediator, facilitator or non-defined participant in conflict resolution formats geared to its advantage. This has allowed Russia to frame the conflicts as of a domestic, ethno-territorial nature. Alternative international field presence has meanwhile been restricted to limited monitoring and local confidence-building tasks.

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[1] See for example H. Coynash, "Human Rights Violations in the Occupied
Parts of Ukraine's Donbas since 2014", February 2021, https://www.ui.se/globalassets/butiken/ui-report/ui-report-no.-1-2021.pdf, and S. Aseyev and A. Umland, "Prisoners as Political Commodities in the
Occupied Areas of the Donbas", April 2021, https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2021/ui-report-no-2-2021.pdf
[2] The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 (https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/c/39501.pdf) contains, among other things, a commitment from participating states to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any participating State.
[3] The Charter of Paris for a New Europe of 1990 (https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/6/39516.pdf) explicitly recognises the freedom of participating States to choose their own security arrangements.
[4] "Memorandum on security assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons", https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280401fbb

This is not to say that the affected states' national histories, such as local developments around the fall of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, do not matter today, that local conflict dynamics do not exist or are irrelevant, or that there is no need for confidence-building and reconciliation efforts at the community level. Local violence did indeed erupt in both Georgia and Moldova as the Soviet Union broke apart, which together with other wrongdoings and propaganda efforts have left wounds that remain to be healed.

However, the larger and yet-to-be-resolved conflicts that we face today came into being only after they were deliberately exaggerated, escalated and instrumentalised by Russia. To the extent that local agency exists, it has to significant degrees been enabled through critical Russian support, mainly but not only of a military kind, and the possibility of more Russian back-up if needed.

To understand the anatomy of the protracted conflicts, it is useful to consider both Russia's policy priorities and the "toolbox" for instrumentalising conflict and conflict resolution processes that it has developed over time, partly through trial-and-error. The various tools are used opportunistically and with calibration to circumstances, tactical goals and anticipated reactions. Often, a desire can be discerned to create different options and keep these open. Steps have consequently been taken in different chronological orders, if at all, leading to significant variation between the different conflict theatres. Nonetheless, certain patterns certainly exist, often with the same officials, such as Vladislav Surkov and Dmitry Kozak, overseeing Russian policy.

Importantly, Russia's violations of the rules-based international order in the protracted conflicts cannot be separated from its violations at home. This parallelism confirms the relevance of the OSCE's comprehensive concept of security, which links conditions within states to security between them. In this case, it implies that external aggression and internal repression are two sides of the same coin. In essence, we are thus not so much facing crises "in and around" Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova as a larger, systemic and transnational Russia crisis.

In the context of protracted conflicts in Eastern Europe, Nagorno-Karabakh also deserves attention, but is covered here only to a limited extent. This conflict is a somewhat separate case due to the strong and open interstate conflict dimension between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the especially disturbing history of inter-ethnic violence, casualties and displacement, which started even before the break-up of the Soviet Union. As Russia wants to avoid being perceived as choosing sides, it has been reluctant to engage in openly antagonistic behaviour towards either state, unlike its position towards Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Overall, Moscow has less influence and control over this protracted conflict than in the other ones.

In relative terms, however, Russia is still more influential than any other external actor, with the partial exception of Turkey whose support for Azerbaijan may have been crucial to the outcome of the hostilities in the autumn of 2020. In any event, the Kremlin has undoubtedly used the conflict to pursue its own interests. Among other things, Russia has sold arms to both states and deployed soldiers to Armenia, which has been given Russian security guarantees. It also acted outside of the established OSCE Minsk Group format, both before and after securing a permanent post as one of the group's co-chairs formally responsible for the negotiations. Notably, Moscow unilaterally brokered a ceasefire agreement in November 2020 that provided for an exclusively Russian "peacekeeping force" in and around Nagorno-Karabakh.[5] Russia thereby re-established a military presence inside Azerbaijan that is more significant than the one it lost when the Gabala radar station was closed in 2012–2013. Through its unilateral brokering, Moscow bypassed not only the OSCE Minsk Group but also the OSCE High-Level Planning Group, which has been planning for

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[5] "Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation", http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384

a multinational OSCE peacekeeping force to Nagorno-Karabakh since 1994. The agreement makes no reference to these formats or other relevant OSCE functions, such as the personal representative of the rotating OSCE chair. It also goes against the former general agreement that any peacekeepers should not come from any of the co-chairing states or any neighbours of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Russian Policy Priorities

A sphere of influence

Judging by the Kremlin's rhetoric and actions, it is seeking to establish a sphere of influence over its "near abroad", as it possessively refers to the former Soviet republics – even Moldova, which borders the EU but not Russia. The desire to control or at least enjoy tacit veto rights in "buffer states" along or near Russia's external borders – and to some extent also further away, such as in the Western Balkans – never faded in revanchist circles in Russia after the end of the Cold War. It also grew stronger after Vladimir Putin became president and centralised and strengthened power, with the help of old KGB friends and against the backdrop of rising oil and gas prices.

Ideally, the Kremlin would like to have loyal and controllable central governments in the states in its perceived sphere of influence. Through carrots and sticks, these governments should be able to be compelled or cajoled to serve Russian interests, including by allowing their territories to function as a *cordon sanitaire* for Russia with forward-deployed Russian military assets. At the very least, they should not be members of or have any closer association with NATO and the EU.

Moscow is trying to achieve this, among other means, through bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements such as the Russia-dominated and mainly political Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Long-term, even closer forms of integration is a likely goal. Weak and dependent governments are preferable since they are easier to control but, at the same time, they must not be so fragile that they risk falling. As currently evidenced in Belarus, Russian support to prop up a struggling regime may be necessary, which on the other hand offers opportunities to demand concessions not previously achieved.

If, however, developments are deemed to run counter to the interests of the Kremlin, it has not shied away from resorting to serious destabilisation in order to secure its influence. A core element of this "spoiler policy", as experienced by Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, is the perpetuation, escalation or even initiation of conflict, with overt or covert support for supposedly just movements for ethnic self-determination, local autonomy or secession.

Regime security and survival

Underlying the Russian leadership's wish to establish a sphere of influence is a desire to ensure its own privileges, security and survival. Inside Russia, a paranoid fear of protest and demands for political change drive the Kremlin's increasingly harsh repression. For the same fundamental reasons, the spread of democracy in Russia's perceived sphere of influence is also seen as an existential threat. To prevent a democratisation of Russia, which would present major risks for the current leadership, the Kremlin wants to demonstrate to the Russian population that "colour revolutions" such as the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014, where people demanding democratic reforms revolted against corrupt leaders, inevitably lead to chaos.

The rallying around the flag effect and the deflection of public attention from domestic problems that occur in times of conflict are also important. Thus far, these aspects have probably been background factors and welcome "bonus effects" of Moscow's interventionist policies abroad rather than direct triggers. This, however, does not exclude the possibility of more external aggression as an evasive manoeuvre to prevent or respond to a potential future Russian domestic crisis.

A renegotiated European security order

Combined, the Russian leadership's desire to control its "near abroad" and ensure its own security amount to a decades-long, consistent attempt to renegotiate the normative foundations of the European security order. The essence of Russian rhetoric, actions and diplomatic initiatives, such as the 2008 European Security Treaty proposed by the then President, Dmitry Medvedev, is that Russia should be accepted as a "great power" with privileged international prerogatives – especially in its "near abroad".[6] What this entails in practice is that some European states should be less sovereign than others, and not have the right to choose their own security arrangements, in direct contradiction of the OSCE Charter of Paris. One manifestation of this position is the unspecified threats made by the Kremlin regarding potential NATO military infrastructure in Ukraine.[7] In the supposed "buffer states" and in Russia itself, "interference" from elsewhere should be prohibited. Especially with regard to Russia, this should include issues related to human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law, which should no longer be considered matters of direct and legitimate concern to other states – a key tenet of the post-Cold War agreements within the OSCE.[8]

As demonstrated by its European Security Treaty proposal, Russia would ideally like to see such a renegotiated security order established with the explicit approval of other major powers – although an implicit acceptance of established facts on the ground might also be sufficient for safeguarding Moscow's interests. As an alternative to such an outspoken or tacit "grand bargain" over the heads of the supposed "buffer states", the Kremlin could achieve its aim by pressuring the states in its perceived sphere of influence to give in to Russian demands. Either way, the Russian leadership would draw the conclusion that its deliberate violations of fundamental UN, OSCE and Council of Europe principles and commitments was paying off.

Weakening "the West"

In parallel, the Kremlin sees a need to disrupt, divide and generally weaken "the West", meaning those democratic states and institutions that want restored respect for the agreed European security order and that the central governments of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova wish to deepen their approximation to and integration with. Central targets here are the US and NATO, but also the EU and many of its member states, as well as several international organisations, some of which Russia is itself a member. Subversive operations against these are carried out in a myriad of ways, using what have been termed active or hybrid measures. Among these are election interference, cyberattacks, corruption schemes, disinformation and propaganda. Meanwhile, many of the

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[6] "The draft of the European Security Treaty", http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6152
[7] "Kremlin says NATO expansion in Ukraine is a 'red line' for Putin", *Reuters*, 27 September 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-says-nato-expansion-ukraine-crosses-red-line-putin-2021-09-27/
[8] For more on this, see the document of the Moscow Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE of 1991, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/3/14310.pdf

targeted Western states are heavily used by the Russian elite for both business, financial and private purposes.

The strategic aim of these malign activities is to increase Russia's comparative power, strengthen its negotiating positions and extract concessions or in other ways influence political decision making. Such an approach is rooted in a zero-sum game view of the world and driven by the above objectives. It has also an ideological (or at least a "fuzzy" anti-ideological) dimension in the sense that democratic, open societies are seen as threats to the Kremlin not only for what they *do*, but also for what they *are*. The ideas of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, including aspects such as gender equality and sexual freedom, constitute threats in themselves to the current Russian leaders. Their power also depends on the scarecrow image of external (and internal) enemies on which various domestic problems can be blamed.

For this reason, and contrary to what some analysts working in the realist school of international relations believe, a Yalta-style "grand bargain" and renegotiated European security order that somehow acknowledges a Russian sphere of influence or forces "in-between status" on certain states would be unlikely to bring stability. Even in such a scenario, Russia's antagonistic behaviour against democratic, open societies would most likely continue, albeit from a new baseline. It is important to note in this context Moldova's constitutionally mandated status of permanent neutrality and ban on foreign military troops on its territory. For more than a quarter of a century, this has not been sufficient to achieve either the withdrawal of unwanted Russian military forces, or resolution of the supposedly internal conflict.

Lastly, it is sometimes argued that Moscow's aggressive behaviour towards other states is and should be recognised by the Kremlin as a strategic mistake since it increases animosity towards Russia and uses up Russian resources that could be used more constructively elsewhere. Such assertions may be part of a broader strategic communication effort but are on their own of little importance and even risk leading to wishful thinking. First, what foreigners believe to be rational for Russia and possibly also its leadership is clearly not what the current Russian leadership believes to be rational from its point of view. Second, we must deal with Russia as it in fact behaves, not as we think it ought to conduct itself.

Russia's Toolbox for Instrumentalising Conflict

Russian military forces in different forms

Russian military forces have been a constant and critical factor in the conflicts played out in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. These forces have over time engaged in a variety of activities as official, regular contingents, irregular armed groups or so-called peacekeepers. The different categories and the blurred lines between them, occasionally also vis-à-vis Moscow-supported local forces, have often and deliberately caused confusion, as have ambiguously or poorly drafted agreements of various kinds.

A common feature is that the Russian military presence and its activities have been in bad faith, if not in outright violation of national and international law, OSCE principles and commitments, and Russian obligations set out in bilateral agreements. In all three states, Russian detachments have been involved in hostilities against legitimate state forces – and remain deployed despite the lack of host nation consent, if there ever was one. Regular threats of military escalation have also been made, for example when the Russian Parliament on 1 March 2014 officially approved the use of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine as regular Russian troops and equipment amassed on the

Russian-Ukrainian border. Significant Russian military build-ups near the border and on the now heavily militarised Crimean peninsula also took place in the spring of 2021 and more recently.

A quick rundown of Russia's military presence in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine

- In both **Georgia** and **Moldova**, Russia has refused to completely abandon the military presence it inherited from the Soviet Union, despite pleas from the two states and a formal Russian commitment to withdrawal made at the OSCE summit in Istanbul in 1999.[9] Russian military forces were officially neutral in the various hostilities of the early 1990s, but in reality gave active and probably decisive support to the insurrectionists in both states. This Russian support continued after the signing of Moscow-brokered/dictated ceasefire agreements and the deployment of Russian "peacekeepers", which Moscow subsequently refused to replace with genuine multinational mechanisms. In Moldova, Russia is deliberately shuffling the cards by largely drawing its "peacekeepers" from the "Operational Group of Russian Forces". Moscow claims that this group, which lacks host nation consent, needs to be in Moldova to guard a large arms and ammunition depot in Cobasna that Russia refuses to either destroy or withdraw.

- In **the August 2008 war in Georgia**, intervening Russian military forces played the decisive role after Russia and its proxies provoked the initial escalation. An often-quoted report by an independent international fact-finding mission was critical of the Georgian government's overreaction.[10] Less frequently cited parts of this report, however, stressed Russia's repeated transgressions before, during and after the escalation. The war therefore needs to be seen as an episode in a longer-running interstate conflict. Since then, despite a promise to withdraw, Russia has consolidated its military presence in both non-government-controlled areas.

- In **Ukraine**, Russia had a regulated military presence in Crimea until the start of its covert military intervention in February 2014, which blatantly violated the bilateral host arrangement, international law and other fundamental principles and commitments. Russia has also systematically engaged in subversive acts in other parts of Ukraine, most successfully in eastern Donbas. There, measures have ranged all the way up to large-scale covert interventions by Russian regular military units in the crucial battles of Ilovaisk in 2014 and Debaltseve in 2015, which forced Ukraine to agree to the Minsk agreements.[11] A "third front" also exists in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, where Russian forces fired on and seized three Ukrainian naval vessels in November 2018.

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[9] The commitments can be found in the Istanbul Document of 1999 and the attached Georgian-Russian joint statement (https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/5/39569.pdf). For more on Russia's non-fulfilled commitments and the link to the CFE Treaty, see: V. Socor, "Russia's Retention of Gudauta Base – An Unfulfilled CFE Treaty Commitment", Eurasia Daily Monitor 3, no. 99 (2006).
[10] Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Report, Volume I-III, 2009 https://www.mpil.de/en/pub/publications/archive/independent_international_fact.cfm
[11] "Russia 'lost 220 troops' in Ukraine - Nemtsov report", https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32705610 (the original report in Russian is available at https://www.putin-itogi.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Putin.Voina_.pdf)

The only partially visible activities of the Russian intelligence and security agencies must also be considered. While most of their operations are carried out covertly, the Russian FSB has openly built military-style "border guard" bases in the Russia-recognised "breakaway republics" in Georgia and engages in various "borderisation" activities, such as the construction of barbed wire fortifications and detentions among the local population. Further categories of Russian military or semi-military actors include volunteers of various kinds, organised, directed and supported, or at least tolerated, by the Russian leadership, as well as Kremlin-linked private military companies, such as the Wagner Group, which has reportedly been active in Ukraine.[12]

Local actors portrayed as independent actors

Another more or less constant factor in the conflicts faced by Kyiv, Tbilisi and Chisinau has been Russian efforts to establish and support "de facto authorities" in the non-government-controlled areas as legitimate and ostensibly independent conflict parties. The Kremlin's political, economic and military support to "separatists", "irredentists", "militias", and so on, of varying degrees of authenticity (sometimes none) and local popularity serves to strengthen the Russian narrative that the conflicts are of an exclusively internal character (if not driven by the US/NATO and Washington-steered central governments). It also creates possibilities for Russia to act with deniability and has given Russia additional clout in negotiation and "joint peacekeeping" formats.

To lend legitimacy to the "breakaway republics", statehood symbols in the form of alternative flags, "constitutions", "governments" and institutions have been established. "Elections" and "referendums" are regularly carried out, usually with "monitoring" mainly by Russian observers and the odd Western representative from the far-right and far-left of the political spectrum. If need be, carrots and sticks are used with local actors to ensure the outcome desired by Moscow or to deal with local dynamics that do not follow the Kremlin's script. That the activities and "de facto institutions" are illegal according to both national and international law is blatantly ignored. Also ignored are regular, often enormous, human rights violations and abuses, and for example the prohibition on the return of over 200,000 internally displaced ethnic Georgians to Abkhazia where they might otherwise have formed a majority. In addition, criminal activities by the "de facto authorities" and others in the non-government-controlled areas further contribute to the perpetuation of conflict.

A corresponding Russian policy can be found in the military field in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The greatest travesty to date is "the little green men", or the Russian regular military forces operating without insignia that were deployed to Crimea in February 2014 and initially claimed by Moscow to be local self-defence forces. As noted above, Russian regular military forces later also intervened covertly in eastern Donbas. Here, however, the main Russian effort has been to instigate protests against Kyiv and secretly organise, arm, train, lead and reinforce by now rather formidable, semi-regular local forces that, according to Kyiv, have more tanks than Germany or France, and Spain or Italy.[13] In this connection, it is worth recalling the numerous examples of Russian military equipment observed in the non-government-controlled areas of eastern Donbas that had never

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[12] See for example "Unleashing the PMCs and Irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas",
https://jamestown.org/program/unleashing-the-pmcs-and-irregulars-in-ukraine-crimea-and-donbas/
[13] "President at the UN General Assembly: Donbas literally became a production line for Russia's killing machine",
February 2019, https://www.mil.gov.ua/en/news/2019/02/20/president-at-the-un-general-assembly-donbas-literally-became-a-production-line-for-russias-killing-machine/

been a part of Ukraine's arsenal.[14] Another, particularly brazen, example is Russia's deployment of an advanced anti-aircraft BUK missile system, which shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on 17 July 2014.[15]

Taken to its political extreme, Russian support for the "breakaway republics" means recognition of these entities as sovereign states. This happened after the 2008 war in Georgia, when Russia decided to upgrade its established direct contacts with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali to "diplomatic relations". This was followed by "bilateral agreements" on the establishment of Russian military bases and military cooperation, among other things. Russian overtures have been made to other states to follow suit – thus far with only very limited success apart from with states such as Syria, Venezuela and Nicaragua. In 2014, Russia also recognised Crimea as an independent state for a few days before its illegal annexation.

"Passportisation" and other integration measures

The attempts to establish the "breakaway republics" as legitimate and independent actors have been supplemented by measures that increasingly tie them to Russia. In the non-government-controlled areas of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, Russia has engaged in "passportisation", or the systematic, large-scale distribution of Russian citizenship to local residents, in clear violation of the three states' sovereignty. This policy is linked to Russia's proclaimed right to protect the rights and interests of Russian citizens abroad, which Russia referred to in connection with its military intervention in Georgia in 2008 and later brought up in relation to Ukraine.

This "passportisation" strengthens the local populations' links with Russia as they are provided with Russian pensions, and work and study opportunities in Russia. (It also serves a secondary purpose by compensating for Russia's demographic decline.) The policy must also be seen in the light of other integration measures, such as legal, economic, education and security/defence harmonisation. These policies are partly driven by economic interests, but they are principally determined by the overarching goal to secure Russia's influence in its perceived sphere of influence.

The integration policy is most evident in Crimea, where Russia's explicit goal is complete assimilation, but integration efforts are also under way in the other non-government-controlled areas, largely under the Western radar. In Georgia, this started long before the 2008 war and has intensified since Russia's subsequent recognitions of the "breakaway republics" as sovereign states. Despite some resistance from local actors in Abkhazia, Moscow has signed agreements on integration with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali that are so far-reaching that they border on annexation – "de facto annexation" is also a term that has also recently been used to describe developments in eastern Donbas.[16] Another example of Russia's integration efforts can be found in Moldova, where the Russian military in the non-government-controlled area mainly employs local residents. This

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[14] The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission has for example observed the multiple launch rocket system TOS-1 (Buratino) (https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/186276), the UAV Orlan-10 (https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/317386) and the automatic jamming system R-330Zh (Zhitel) (https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/414773). See also "Weapons of the war in Ukraine", Conflict Armament Research, November 2021, https://www.conflictarm.com/reports/weapons-of-the-war-in-ukraine/
[15] For more on this, see the criminal investigation by the Joint Investigation Team (JIT), https://www.prosecutionservice.nl/topics/mh17-plane-crash/criminal-investigation-jit-mh17
[16] "Towards de-facto annexation? Current developments in the 'People's Republics' of eastern Ukraine 2020/2021", https://civicmonitoring.org/towards-de-facto-annexation-current-developments-in-the-peoples-republicsof-eastern-ukraine-2020-2021/

creates dependencies that are hard to break, especially since the Russian military is one of the largest local employers.

Agreements on ceasefires

In all the protracted conflicts, various agreements have been concluded under substantial Russian influence and pressure, sometimes also through unilateral Russian brokerage. The agreements have not been exhaustive peace settlement plans but ceasefire agreements with additional components. For instance, the Minsk agreements on eastern Ukraine contain several political elements. The agreements have been instrumental for Moscow in the sense that they, and the resulting negotiation formats and processes, have defined the conflicts and conflict parties. The texts are often ambiguous, omit major issues and lack detail on and sequencing of the measures covered. Typically, the agreements have frozen fighting positions and established ceasefires (or cessations of hostilities) and buffer/security zones along the contact lines from where withdrawals of military personnel and equipment should take place and beyond which the central governments lack control.

Several of the agreements from the early 1990s also introduced non-UN "peacekeeping forces". In Moldova, the still existing "joint peacekeeping forces" comprise regular Russian soldiers, irregular troops from the non-government-controlled area and, in a minority, legitimate Moldovan state forces. Until 2008, a corresponding arrangement existed in Georgia for the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, in addition to an exclusively Russian "CIS peacekeeping force" for Abkhazia. Through these agreements, Russia has gained a legitimate military presence on the ground and increased its ability to proceed with the subversive measures discussed above.

In parallel, Russia has consistently restricted any other international presence on the ground to limited monitoring and confidence-building tasks for the OSCE or, as previously regarding Abkhazia, the UN. Russia probably agrees to such a presence because it lends legitimacy to Russian-brokered/dictated ceasefire agreements and, if necessary, can still be obstructed through restrictions in the field.[17] Nonetheless, this did not prevent Russia from refusing to extend the OSCE and UN field presence in Georgia following the war in 2008, or the limited OSCE monitoring presence at two Russian checkpoints on the Russian-Ukrainian border in September 2021.

Frameworks for conflict resolution processes

Typically, the ceasefire agreements have also established frameworks for conflict resolution processes or at least discussions on political, security, economic and humanitarian matters, with the future legal-political "status" of the non-government-controlled areas as key contentious issues. Notably, all such processes bar one have taken place under the aegis of the OSCE. The exception was the UN-chaired "Georgian-Abkhaz peace process" before the war in August 2008, after which representatives of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and the EU joined the UN as co-chairs of the "Geneva International Discussions". For both the establishment of the formats and in the following discussions, the definition of the conflict parties was and remains a main bone of contention.

To a significant degree, Russia has been successful in promoting its narrative that the conflicts are domestic disputes. In the 1990s, Moscow secured itself the role of mediator or facilitator in talks

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[17] See A. Umland, "Achievements and Limitations of the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine", June 2021, https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2021/ui-report-no-3-2021.pdf

between representatives of central governments and "breakaway republics" in the "Georgian-Abkhaz peace process" and the "3+2" (later "5+2") talks" on "the Transdniestrian settlement process". A slightly different set-up that nonetheless reflected the notion of a domestic conflict was the "Joint Control Commission" for "the Georgian-Ossetian conflict", a format that led to an isolated Georgian government facing representatives from "South Ossetia", Russia and (Russian) North Ossetia. Any attempt to change these formats or the related "peacekeeping" arrangements was consistently blocked by Russia until the 2008 war in Georgia, when the two formats for Georgia were replaced with the "Geneva International Discussions". This format is less imbalanced but allows for Russian participation in an unspecified role alongside representatives of the Russia-recognised "breakaway republics" on an equal footing with the other participants.

With regard to Ukraine, the sui generis Normandy format, comprising Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France, and the Trilateral Contact Group with representatives from Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office have the benefit of reflecting the reality that this is an interstate conflict. Russian representatives, however, have consistently refused to make any clear statements or commitments that recognise Russia as a conflict party and systematically try to shift the discussion to direct talks between Kyiv and the two "people's republics". Moscow also categorically refuses to discuss Crimea, considering its status a "closed issue".

Russian proposals for conflict resolution

Russian demands and proposals indicate that Moscow's idea of conflict resolution, insofar as it has one, is reunification through some kind of federalisation, confederation or decentralisation that would de jure or de facto prevent any NATO or EU integration. The most detailed example so far is the 2003 so-called Kozak memorandum on Moldova.[18] This Russian plan proposed the creation of a federal Moldovan state that would effectively have cemented the presence of a Moscow-controlled "state-within-a-state", influencing Moldova from within. Russian demands for what is commonly referred to as "special status" for eastern Donbas echo this desire. Less detailed but similar Russian ideas have also been floated for Georgia. Even if Moscow were to achieve conflict resolution along such lines – which, it should be noted, would not mean restored respect for the established European security order – the Kremlin would probably consider such an achievement only an intermediate step towards more ambitious goals. As noted above, Russia's strategic objective is not to ensure the rights and security of any "breakaway republic" – as evidenced most starkly when it annexed Crimea a few days after recognising it as a sovereign state – or to control certain territory, even though it may also wish to do so. Rather, the objective is to prevent the affected states from moving away from Russia's perceived sphere of interest and to thwart the spread of democracy, human rights and the rule of law towards Russia.

Additional Russian Tools

Propaganda and disinformation

In parallel with the above-mentioned methods, the Kremlin disseminates intense propaganda and disinformation within Russia and in the affected states, especially the non-government-controlled areas, as well as in third states and international organisations. The messages conveyed through different channels are adapted to circumstances and target groups. They may change over time,

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[18] The proposal can be found (in Russian) at http://mfa-pmr.org/ru/KdT

but consistently support the official Russian narrative. In addition, they aim to spread confusion and reduce trust. Internally, images of a strong Russia facing external enemies and a chaotic outside serve to distract the population from domestic problems, increase cohesion and drum up support for the Russian leadership. Initially, this was a particular success after the illegal annexation of Crimea on 18 March 2014.

In the Kremlin's narrative, central governments critical of Moscow are portrayed as illegitimate and irresponsible regimes that are under the control of Washington, as a result of US-orchestrated "colour revolutions", and violating or threatening the rights of Russian citizens, Russian-speakers and others, even to the extent of genocide. To a significant degree, Moscow's revisionist-apologetic narrative includes various pseudo-historical and dubious, if not absurd, legal claims. "The West" is meanwhile portrayed as decadent and "Russophobic", a threat to moral, religious, historical and cultural "traditional values", and intent on breaking Russia apart. A fair amount of "whataboutism" is also part of the propaganda mix, which includes attempts to justify Russian policy on Georgia and Ukraine by referring to the secession of Kosovo as a precedent. Such comparisons, however, fail to address the ensuing inconsistency in the Kremlin's recognition policy or attitude to separatist stirrings inside Russia.

Other hybrid measures

Russia has also repeatedly used other political tools to try to influence developments in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Examples include on-and-off economic punishment, such as import bans on wine and mineral water that allegedly do not conform with Russian standards, while the "breakaway republics" are treated favourably. More examples can be found in the realms of energy policy and in the form of cyberattacks and support for domestic opposition groups and other forces that directly or indirectly promote Moscow's agenda.

Internal repression

A prerequisite for Russia's instrumentalisation of conflict, or at least both a contributing factor and a consequence, are repressive measures and human rights problems inside Russia and the areas of other states that Moscow controls. This restricts media freedom and political competition, silences dissenting voices, and leads to systems that lack meaningful checks and balances. To name a particularly flagrant example, Russian law considers criticism of the annexation of Crimea a criminal act of questioning Russia's territorial integrity. Other examples that illustrate this aspect of the Kremlin's overall strategy include the recent Russian obstruction of ODIHR monitoring of the fraudulent State Duma elections in September 2021, and of the holding of the annual OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting.

The Logic of the Protracted Conflicts

Why have the central governments of the affected states accepted the problematic agreements and formats? First, some of these arrangements stem from times when Russia was, perhaps, at least given the benefit of the doubt as an honest broker. Assumptions that progress might be possible through a less confrontational approach to Moscow may also have been made, as well as an overall unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of an armed conflict with Russia.

Second, the arrangements were often made at times when the central government was weak and had suffered significant battle losses, with looming risks of even larger military defeat and perhaps also significant economic and other punishment. This means that negotiations took place under duress and required far-reaching concessions in the face of explicit or implicit military threats. For example, while it is true that Ukraine's 2014–2019 President Petro Poroshenko agreed to the Minsk agreements of September 2014 and February 2015, he did so practically at gunpoint following Russia's military escalation through the large-scale insertion of regular Russian army units around Ilovaisk and Debaltseve, respectively.

Third, the policies of the wider international community have been surprisingly permissive vis-à-vis Russia's behaviour, including its repeated violations of the European security order and other commitments. In the early 1990s, Western Europe and the US were largely preoccupied with consolidating the freedom of the Central European and Baltic states, and with trying to end the Yugoslav wars. The hostilities in Moldova and the South Caucasus were largely left to Moscow's handling, based on an underlying assumption that Russian involvement would be a force for good. The comparatively positive relationship with Russia throughout the 1990s, Moscow's own struggle with separatism and the clear Russian commitments at the OSCE summit in Istanbul in 1999 further contributed to widespread hopes of constructive Russian engagement. To some extent, there was simply a lack of interest in and understanding of what was happening, which was later exacerbated by the Western focus on Afghanistan and Iraq.

As the Central European and Baltic states started to join NATO and the EU, and it became increasingly clear that Russia did not intend to live up to its commitments, Western diplomatic efforts to achieve conflict resolution increased by, for instance, the appointment of an EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus. Although useful, such steps were too little, too late. Neither the US nor the EU was willing to invest the political capital that would have been required to substantially change the dynamic in either of the conflicts. Meanwhile, Moscow insisted on the continuation of established formats and processes, and was easily capable of sustaining or even intensifying the methods previously applied.

The war in Georgia in 2008 led to an increase in the EU's engagement through the then president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, who as incumbent of the rotating EU Council Presidency brokered the Six-Point Agreement that also led to the deployment of an EU monitoring mission. While the Russian military intervention was criticised, no major costs were imposed on the Russian leadership. In Georgia, this approach has been sustained even though Moscow has refused to honour its commitment in the "Sarkozy plan" to withdraw its military forces. In fact, Russia almost immediately backtracked on this promise by advancing its troops into the Akhalgori valley and then distanced itself even further from the agreement by officially recognising the two "breakaway republics" as sovereign states. Even so, the conflict largely disappeared from the international agenda. Instead, Russia and its supposedly liberal, "West-leaning" president, Dmitry Medvedev, were courted with various incentives for cooperation. These included the attempted US reset of 2009 and the EU-Russia Partnership for Modernisation in 2010, a year that also saw Germany's unsuccessful Meseberg initiative on conflict resolution in Moldova.

Alas, these and other conciliatory attempts at rapprochement with Moscow did not bring the conflicts any closer to resolution. Nor did they prevent the Russian leadership from even more violations of the European security order, as evidenced by its repressive response to the widespread domestic protests in 2011–2012 and its military intervention in Ukraine in 2014.

The Minsk agreements brokered by Chancellor Angela Merkel together with President François Hollande in 2014 and 2015 have yielded ceasefires, but only fragile ones that have been followed

by thousands of casualties. Since the agreements were concluded, there have been numerous additional contacts and negotiation rounds, but the prospects for conflict resolution remain distant.

Western sanctions against Russian targets were indeed introduced in response to Russia's behaviour in Ukraine. Together with Ukraine's military resolve, these sanctions and the prospects of additional ones have helped deter Russia from even more aggressive action. However, they have taken on more substantial form only once, after the downing of flight MH17 in July 2014 with the loss of 298 mainly West European lives. Since then, Russian violations of the rules-based international order have continued not only in Ukraine, but notably also through its lack of respect for international humanitarian law in Syria.[19] Other examples are Moscow's undermining of the Chemical Weapons Convention in connection with the poisonings of Sergei Skripal and Alexei Navalny.

Why has the democratic international community largely played along with the Moscow-orchestrated charades that the various conflict resolution formats and processes amount to, even though they are at odds with the European security order and at least so far have not resolved any of the conflicts? To understand this, it is necessary to consider two contradictory political imperatives that often coexist: minimising casualties and suffering, on the one hand, and upholding respect for international law and commonly agreed principles and commitments, on the other.

In the cases of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, the first of these two imperatives has usually been prioritised by NATO, the EU and their member states. Their standard responses to Russian aggression and threats have not been to stress the right of states to defend their territories and ensure their constitutional orders according to international law, with due consideration to International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law and other obligations, as applicable. This could perhaps have been expected since self-defence according to the UN Charter is a right that every EU and NATO member state presumably reserves for itself and, through the Lisbon and Washington treaties (Articles 42.7 and 5, respectively), is obliged to uphold with regard to fellow members.

Instead, Western politicians and diplomats have typically called for ceasefires, de-escalation, dialogue, political solutions and "compromise", often with fundamentally illegitimate groups under Russian control. Bottom-up "small steps approaches" with a central role for confidence-building measures at the local level have also been encouraged even though these, at least indirectly, support Moscow's narrative that the conflicts are domestic ones. In addition, proposals on federalisation and decentralisation have been welcomed, or at least not rejected, due to these terms' largely positive connotations in democratic states. However, these concepts acquire a fundamentally different meaning in the context of Russia-promoted settlement schemes aimed at permanently undermining the sovereignty of the affected states.

The positioning of Western actors is understandable given the strong desire to save lives, mitigate suffering and avoid any further escalation. In addition, Russia's military capabilities obviously play a role in the calculus, as do plain ignorance as well as Russian propaganda and brinkmanship. On the one hand, there has often been a lack of will to devote political and material resources to what are perceived as far-away, peripheral or even local conflicts, perhaps caused by irresponsible central governments. On the other hand – and sometimes in parallel – there has been an unwillingness to confront Moscow and challenge its framing of the conflicts. Such timidity stems

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[19] "Syria/Russia: Strategy Targeted Civilian Infrastructure", Human Rights Watch,
https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/15/syria/russia-strategy-targeted-civilian-infrastructure

from a perceived risk of Western states being dragged into a proxy (or even direct) war with Russia, and a wish to avoid negative spillover effects into other areas.

While Western representatives have stressed that there can be "no military solution", and usually refused to deliver lethal weapons for defensive purposes, Russia has used military force or threats of force in breach of the European security order to establish new facts on the ground and to shape ceasefire agreement and conflict resolution processes to its advantage. Once such a conflict resolution process is under way, the international community has felt the need to act carefully not to endanger "fragile negotiations" – the fragility being mostly a result of Russian brinkmanship – or risk a Russian veto of the limited genuinely international presence on the ground. The worse Russia has behaved, the stronger certain camps have called for dialogue, supposedly to build trust and get the Kremlin to understand what is in its own interests.

It is certainly true that open communication channels are needed and dialogue can serve important purposes. However, any argument for its absolute priority confronts a number of problems. Among these is the conflation of the Russian people with the current Russian leadership, which has no proper democratic legitimacy and whose interests are separate from those of the Russian population. Another, more serious, issue is the crucial point that the Kremlin often sees conflict not as a problem, as long as it can be managed at reasonable levels, but as a useful instrument for achieving its objectives.

Even those with fewer illusions might consider flawed processes to have advantages as instruments for conflict management, as opposed to conflict resolution, by ostensibly providing stability, reducing human suffering and offering a theoretical possibility of peaceful conflict resolution at some later stage. However, this reasoning also plays into Russia's hands as the baseline for discussion then moves away from the Russian violations of international law. Instead, focus is put on the Russian-dictated ceasefire agreements and concessions from the victim states deemed necessary for the process to "progress". One example of this is the suggestion to conduct local elections in the non-government-controlled parts of eastern Donbas before illegal armed groups have been disarmed. Key obligations affecting Russia on the withdrawal of military personnel and equipment are meanwhile ignored by Moscow and rarely stressed publicly by Western diplomats out of concern for the continuation of the process or due to fatigue and resignation. In the end, the outside world – both states and institutions – has allowed itself, often along with the victim states, to be taken hostage by the Russian logic of the protracted conflicts.

Policy Recommendations to the Democratic International Community

Acknowledging the challenge

The democratic international community must acknowledge that Russia's instrumentalisation of conflict and the wider "Russia crisis" of which this is part amounts to a serious challenge for European security, the European security order and the rules-based international order more generally. It must base its policies on facts and a sober, comprehensive analysis of those facts. First, after three decades of Russia crushing any hopes that it might play a constructive role in any of the protracted conflicts, the time has come to finally shed any remaining illusions. It should be acknowledged that Russia is not a partner in resolving these conflicts, but the main cause and the prime beneficiary of their continuation. Much work will certainly be needed at the domestic levels even if Russia were to stop its meddling, but with international support the chances of success

should be relatively good. Second, to believe that the Russian leadership considers that its goals have already been achieved would be naive. The working assumption must be that Russia will keep using these conflicts and may even be tempted to instigate new ones. Third, responses to current and future Russian violations will not only have grave effects for the respective victim states, but potentially also significant indirect consequences elsewhere, both in Europe and beyond. Whatever Russia gets away with in Europe, China, for instance, might be tempted to try in Asia.

Full accountability

The time has come for the EU, NATO, and their member states and like-minded partners to stop acquiescing in the Moscow-orchestrated charades. Russia must politically and where possible also legally be held fully accountable for all its blatant violations of the constituent elements of the European security order, and in the case of Ukraine also of the Budapest Memorandum. Failure to do so amounts to a tacit acceptance of a new de facto security order that not only risks making ongoing violations permanent, but also erodes the commonly agreed normative European security order, based on international law and OSCE principles and commitments, and increases the likelihood of further transgressions, even against EU and NATO member states. The foundation for such a policy of full accountability is strategic patience, as well as intra-EU and transatlantic unity. The normative divergence on fundamental issues is likely to remain for the foreseeable future, and at least as long as there is no fundamental shift in Russian domestic politics, but there can be no "business as usual" until Russia ends its ongoing violations. Only this can rebuild trust and confidence.

Conflict resolution formats and processes are needed, but existing ones should be thoroughly evaluated, particularly as regards Russia's role and adherence to agreed principles and commitments. If formats and processes are found to be part of the problem rather than paths to conflict resolution in line with the European security order, alternative approaches must not be excluded a priori. Rather, new formats should then be explored and pushed for, as deemed appropriate by the affected state. As part of such a policy switch, additional and more substantial sanctions must also be considered.

Language development

Outside of the consensus requirements of the OSCE, clear and consistent language about Russia's instrumentalisation of conflict is needed. This calls for an evaluation of the language used about the protracted conflicts, starting with how the affected states are described. Thirty years after the Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin for the last time, it is for example high time to stop talking about European states such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova as "post-Soviet" states and as being in "Russia's backyard" since these terms implicitly devalue their sovereignty. To the extent that one may talk about "Russia's neighbourhood", this is shared with others and, above all, filled with states that have the right to sovereignty, territorial integrity and to choose their own security arrangements.

The impression that the conflicts are solely, or mainly, domestic matters must also be countered, as must attempts by Moscow to present itself as an external honest broker and any equivalence of perpetrator and victim, for example through routine "calls on all sides". Without further explanation

or at least quotation marks in written text, terms such as "pro-Russian separatists", "de facto authorities" or "breakaway republics" usually overstate the extent of local agency. Even correct references to the conflicts as interstate ones are misleading unless they are clear about which state is violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the other. Another term that needs to be reconsidered is "the South Ossetian Administrative Boundary Line", which the EU uses despite the fact that the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast and its corresponding administrative boundary line de jure have not existed since 1990. It must not be forgotten that what is usually meant by this term is the line of contact, which was largely created by Russian military forces in August 2008, in violation of international law, other aspects of the European security order and even the Six-Point Agreement – and caused the displacement of tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians.

Language and conflict narrative aspects are also important when organising or supporting confidence-building measures, Track 2 activities and "non-recognition and engagement" initiatives, where this may make sense, such as with certain actors in Abkhazia. While it may be appropriate to exclude participants from Russia from such formats, the crucial Russian responsibility must not be forgotten. Initiatives of this kind must not convey the impression that the key to conflict resolution lies solely, or even mainly, with changed behaviour within the states where the protracted conflicts are being played out.

Support for victims

The other side of full accountability is full support for the victim states. Naturally, this should not mean unconditional approval of all their policies or the creation of unrealistic expectations. Rather, it means support for efforts to achieve conflict resolution in line with the European security order. This might include diplomatic and material support for states to defend their territories in accordance with international law, but also for genuinely international mechanisms for monitoring and peacekeeping in good faith, as well as for appropriate confidence-building, reconciliation and reintegration initiatives. Such measures are important to be able to call Russian bluffs and address the real problems that exist regardless of "the Russia factor".

In negotiations and interactions with Russia, the democratic international community should coordinate closely with the victim states and play the role of their supporter rather than that of a compromise-seeking mediator. The objective must be that the state suffering from external aggression is given help to negotiate from a position of strength rather than under duress. For this to happen, a readiness to impose or increase the costs of violations must be signalled as early as possible, ideally pre-emptively before an acute crisis. Practical policy development regarding security and defence cooperation, strategic communication, escalation control and sanctions regimes must therefore intensify.[20] Collective situational awareness among partners must also improve, and more comprehensive toolboxes must be developed for deterring and countering hybrid threats.

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[20] For some ideas on this, see G. Gressel and N. Popescu, "The best defence: Why the EU should forge security compacts with its eastern neighbours", November 2020, https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-best-defence-why-the-eu-should-forge-security-compacts-with-its-eastern-neighbours/, and K. Giles, "What deters Russia", September 2021, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/what-deters-russia

The affected states also need assistance in areas not directly related to the conflicts. Through support for democratic and economic development in general, the states' resilience and ability to deal with the conflicts will increase, as will their attractiveness to the population in the currently non-government-controlled areas. As part of this strategy, democracy and human rights issues in the affected states must be addressed. This will support overall security in line with the OSCE's comprehensive concept of security, and is needed to ensure solidarity from other states, which naturally also need to live up to their corresponding commitments.

Intra-EU and transatlantic unity

As noted above, intra-EU and transatlantic unity through coordination and cooperation remain crucial to all aspects of the protracted conflicts, not least policy on Russia. This EU- and US-driven work must involve the UK, Canada and other key partners – and if possible also Turkey, which is an important regional actor in all affected states and has a complex competitive/ cooperative relationship with Russia. While unity within the EU and across the Atlantic has developed in a positive direction, there is still room for improvement, for instance regarding the harmonisation of EU and US sanctions regimes, the fight against corruption and outreach to additional third states.

Internal EU unity remains the essential foundation of its power and must be ensured. This does not mean, however, that efforts should not be made to improve the EU's foreign policies. Russia's ongoing violations of the European security order must be more clearly recognised as a critical issue for the whole EU project. Given this axiom, a broader, more systematic and more thorough EU approach to the protracted conflicts should be developed along the lines sketched out above.

Among other things, the five principles guiding the EU's policy on Russia should be adjusted to reflect the concept of full accountability. The first of these principles lists implementation of the Minsk Agreement as the key condition for any substantial change in the EU's stance towards Russia. It should, however, be made clearer to the Kremlin and everyone else that the EU's relationship with Russia is conditional on Moscow ending all of its ongoing violations, not only in eastern Ukraine, but also in illegally annexed Crimea as well as in Georgia, Moldova and elsewhere, including within Russia. This is not about lecturing or imposing values from the outside, but about legitimate interests and concerns regarding Russian adherence to commonly agreed rules. Once this has been achieved, there is no reason why a genuine partnership with Russia should not be possible based on common values and interests. This vision should be spelled out and developed.

The new German federal government must together with France continue to work to keep the EU member states together. During the upcoming French European Council Presidency and beyond, Berlin and Paris should give more weight to views from the EU member states most exposed to Russia's antagonistic behaviour and steer clear of any "bilateralisation" of their relationships with Moscow. Within the Normandy format and elsewhere, any attempts at conflict resolution that are not in line with the European security order must be resisted. Additional engagement from individual EU member states should also be possible. Given France's special responsibility for the 2008 Six-

Point Agreement regarding Georgia, Paris should, for a start, consider increasing its disproportionately small contribution to the underrated EU Monitoring Mission there.[21]

The United States is likely to focus on China in the coming decades, but Washington must not forget about Russia, which together with China and on its own will remain a significant threat.[22] The protracted conflicts in Eastern Europe matter in this context since they are critical security issues for many of the closest allies and partners of the US, among other things through the illegal forward deployment of Russian military assets. As noted above, the conflicts are also core challenges to the rules-based international order more generally, with potential consequences far beyond the region and even Europe.

Finally, the need to prepare seriously for all scenarios must be acknowledged. Authoritarian regimes are inherently unstable, contrary to what they say or even believe themselves. Things can move fast in either positive or negative directions, and sometimes even in both directions at the same time. This requires investment in knowledge, capabilities and contingency planning, as well as the political will and courage to act resolutely at the right moments.

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[21] As of 5 November 2021, only one (1) of the mission's 214 monitors is from France, compared with for example 20 from Germany and 21 from Sweden, see
https://www.eumm.eu/en/about_eumm/facts_and_figures
[22] M. Kofman and A. Kendall-Taylor, "The Myth of Russian Decline", Foreign Affairs Volume 100 Number 6, November/December 2021

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