



Why Russia's Initial Assault on Ukraine Was Misinterpreted

Julia Kazdobina, Jakob Hedenskog & Andreas Umland
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Executive Summary

Ten years ago, in September 2014, Kyiv and Moscow signed the OSCE-mediated Minsk Protocol and Memorandum (Minsk-I), the stated goal of which was to end the war between Russia and Ukraine that had begun in February that year. Not only did these and the continuous negotiations and numerous documents that followed over more than seven years fail to resolve the conflict. The inconclusive talks and absence of other relevant measures provided Russia with the time and opportunity to consolidate its control over occupied Ukrainian territory, militarize Crimea and prepare for a larger war. Finally, in February 2022, Russia decided to launch an unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine – a historic event that marked the spectacular failure of the Minsk process. We argue that this disaster was predetermined by the West's fundamental misinterpretation of events on Crimea and in the Donetsk Basin (Donbas) during 2014. This misunderstanding led to wrong approaches and abortive policies to end the conflict. Our report explains why and how this mistaken view emerged and its repercussions for Ukraine. We conclude with four recommendations on how to avoid a repetition of the mistakes made in the period 2014–2021.

Some arguments of this report have been earlier outlined in our article: "How the West Misunderstood Moscow in Ukraine," Foreign Policy, 17 July 2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/07/17/ukraine-russia-war-2014-donbas-crimea-west/>.

Introduction

On 17 July 2014, the world was shocked by the news of the crash, in eastern Ukraine, of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH-17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. All 298 passengers and crew on board the Boeing 777, including 80 children, were killed. While this was an exceptionally tragic event, it was only one of many fateful episodes in that year. Over the course of 2014, the largest European war since 1945 unfolded in Ukraine in a succession of ever more alarming monthly armed escalations by Russia in Crimea and the Donets Basin (Donbas).

The initial trigger of increasing tensions and the eventual start of war had been Ukraine's ambition, since 2008, to forge a closer contractual relationship with the European Union. This happened through an Association Agreement, which included a so-called Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Although largely about economic issues, this treaty – initialled in 2012, debated throughout 2013, and signed in 2014 – was seen by Moscow as a threat to its ambitions to continue to control Ukraine and as a dangerous model for other former Soviet republics to follow.

Russia's war started with the armed occupation of Crimea by regular Russian troops in February 2014 and proceeded with the annexation of the peninsula in March 2014.¹ This was followed in April 2014 by an incursion of Russian irregular troops – paramilitary adventurers, political extremists and Cossacks – into Ukraine's Donets Basin (Donbas).² Throughout May 2014, among other events, a violent escalation of street clashes in Odesa led to over 40 deaths.³ In June 2014, a Ukrainian Il-76 transport plane approaching Luhansk airport was shot down, killing all 49 crew and troops on board. Flight MH-17 was shot down in July. Finally, regular Russian troops began invading eastern Ukraine on a large scale in mid-August 2014.

There was thus a six-month continuous accumulation of increasingly aggressive Russian military activity on Ukrainian soil and ever graver violations of international law in the heart of Europe.⁴ Nonetheless, the West reacted only meekly with political declarations and minor punitive measures. Sectoral sanctions from the EU only appeared in late July 2014, in the immediate aftermath of Russia shooting down Flight MH-17.

These sanctions were announced on 29 July 2014 when the Ukrainian army was on the offensive in the Donbas. There was no urgent need at this time for the EU to impose novel measures, as it looked as if Kyiv would win in eastern Ukraine by the end of the summer. At the time of the introduction of the first EU sectoral sanctions, which remained the severest western measures imposed until February 2022, it was not yet foreseeable that the Ukrainian advance against the Russia-directed irregular troops in Ukraine would be repulsed a month

1 Julia Kazdobina, Jakob Hedenskog and Andreas Umland, "Why the Russo-Ukrainian War Started Already in February 2014," *SCEEUS Report*, No. 2, 2024. <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/why-the-russo-ukrainian-war-started-already-in-february-2014/>.

2 Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, ed., *Who Are the Fighters? Irregular Armed Groups in the Russian-Ukrainian War since 2014* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2024).

3 Julia Kazdobina, Jakob Hedenskog and Andreas Umland, "Why the Donbas War Was Never 'Civil,'" *SCEEUS Report*, No. 6, 2024. <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/why-the-donbas-war-was-never-civil/>.

4 Jakob Hauter, ed., *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014–2020* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2021).

later as a result of the large-scale deployment of regular Russian troops to the Donbas.⁵

These circumstances illustrate that this first round of larger western sanctions had only an indirect relation to Ukraine itself. The main cause was Russia's mass killing of EU citizens, mainly Dutch, on the Malaysian Airlines flight on 17 July 2014, not the Russian mass terror against Ukrainian citizens for three months beforehand. In the following more than seven years, the armed conflict simmered on and took thousands of Ukrainian lives. However, as no further mass killing of EU or other foreign citizens took place, only relatively little additional action was taken by the West.

Only after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 did the West start to wake up to the reality that Russia is a revisionist state seeking to impose its own vision of a European security order. To be sure, President Vladimir Putin had already indicated his intentions in his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, and several times since. However, when Russia launched its covert aggression against Ukraine in 2014, many in the West still believed that this was the result of a mutual misunderstanding, and that Russia's aims were limited. Only much later did it become clear to most that this was not the case – and that consequently this new situation called for different solutions from those tried in other inter-ethnic conflicts.

At the time, the Donbas War of 2014–22 was often interpreted as an intra-Ukrainian conflict that could be resolved in isolation from the wider context of Russian foreign policy. These efforts not only failed, but also led to ever increasing adventurism by Moscow. Why did the West fail to properly diagnose the problem for such a long time? In which ways are the lessons from this failure important today?

Lack of country-specific expertise

That tensions between Russia and Ukraine had been high since Ukraine's independence in 1991, and Moscow's meddling in Ukrainian affairs, had largely escaped western journalists, analysts and scholars before the start of open Russian intrusion in Ukraine in 2014. When western journalists arrived to cover the events of that year, the situation on the ground was chaotic and its interpretation challenging for many newly minted Ukraine experts. To many of them, Russian narratives of regional escalation in eastern and southern Ukraine were simple, understandable and made sense – not least to those reporters with a history of working in Moscow.

There was then a glaring lack of international awareness of Russia's hybrid methodology in its foreign relations. Ten years ago, few understood the new Russian way of war for which Ukraine was a testing ground, and which had already been partly implemented in both Moldova and Georgia. Attempts by Ukrainians, other Eastern Europeans and some alert western experts to explain Russia's strategy were met with scepticism. They sounded to outside observers like overblown warnings, Manichean arguments or even conspiracy theories.

The parachuted-in reporters from the West arriving in eastern Ukraine in 2014 witnessed

⁵ Hugo von Essen and Andreas Umland, "Russia's Dictated Non-Peace in the Donbas 2014–2022: Why the Minsk Agreements Were Doomed to Fail," in: Stefan Hansen, Olha Husieva and Kira Frankenthal, eds., *Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine: "Zeitenwende" for German Security Policy* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2023), pp. 95-118.

pro-Russian protests and frequently listened to pro-Russian Ukrainian citizens. They often failed to contextualize the events unfolding or properly rank the salience of the seemingly obvious pro-Russian local trend. Some foreign observers could not even tell the difference between residents of the Donbas and “political tourists” from neighbouring Russian Oblasts who crossed the state border as adventurers or were bussed into Ukraine to participate in the “Russian Spring”. Some of Moscow’s agents in the Donbas had moved to Ukraine from Russia-controlled territories outside Russia such as Transnistria blurring the Russian involvement in the putatively local “rebellion”.

Pro-Ukrainian journalists and anti-separatist regional political voices of the Donbas, by contrast, faced open threats and physical violence from their opponents, often guided by Moscow. Pro-Ukraine locals were frequently unable to express themselves publicly, and thus remained invisible to visiting reporters. A number of eastern Ukrainians who resisted the takeover were threatened, attacked, abducted, severely injured or secretly killed by collaborating local or Russian irregular actors, many if not most of whom were encouraged, financed or directed by the Kremlin in 2014–2021. This all prepared the way for Russia’s eventual annexation of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in September 2022.

Looking at Ukraine through Russian lenses

Western media expanded its presence in Ukraine only in late 2021, on the eve of the full-scale invasion. Before that, much of the reporting was done by correspondents based in Moscow who spoke only Russian. As the Ukrainian journalist and media critic, Otar Dovzhenko, told *Radio Liberty*: “If you live in Russia and read Russian media, whether you are American, German or French, you start to look at events in Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus a little bit through Russian eyes”.⁶

The *Washington Post* opened its office in Ukraine in May 2022 and former Moscow office correspondent Isabel Khurshudyan was sent to report on Ukraine. Similarly, the *New York Times* (NYT) opened an office in Ukraine in July 2022 and Andrew E. Kramer, who had lived in Russia for more than 15 years, was appointed head of the Kyiv bureau. Kramer had worked at the *New York Times* Moscow bureau and previously written biased articles about Ukraine.⁷

One example of Kramer’s imbalanced reporting was a February 2022 piece headlined “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia” – a formulation largely in line with official Russian propaganda at that time and today.⁸ The content of the article, which was published two weeks before Russia’s full-scale invasion, was – unlike its headline – not a repetition of Putin’s justification for the attack on Ukraine.⁹ Nonetheless, Kramer warned of “dozens of right-wing or nationalist groups that represent a potent political force in Ukraine”.¹⁰ The picture Kramer painted in the article was a misrepresentation of Ukraine’s

6 Dmytro Barkar, “Zakhidni ZMI v Ukrayini rozshyriuiut prysutnist : Kyiv peretvoriuet sia na khab mizhnarodnykh media,” *Radio Svoboda*, 21 December 2021. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/zakhidni-media-rozshyryuyut-prysutnist-v-ukrayini/31620007.html>.

7 Anastasiia Marushevska, “How International Media Helps Russia and Why It Is a Problem,” *Ukrainer*, 20 November 2022. <https://www.ukrainer.net/international-media-helps-russia/>.

8 Andrew E. Kramer, “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia,” *The New York Times*, 10 February 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/ukraine-nationalism-russia-invasion.html>.

party landscape in early 2022.⁹ By blowing Ukraine's radical right out of proportion, it followed a line popular in Kremlin-influenced mass media.¹⁰ Such articles would probably have been written differently – or not at all – had the author spent time living in Kyiv rather than Moscow.

Many eventually learned to be more critical of Russian narratives but sometimes an unconscious bias remains. People retain their initial interpretations. It takes time and effort to unlearn narratives and explanations that can still be exploited by Russian propaganda.

Distinguishing fact from fiction

There were multiple signs of direct Russian involvement in suspicious events in the Donbas from April 2014, if not before. Most Ukrainians understood intuitively that something was wrong from the early days of the alleged rebellion. They already sensed that the war was being initiated, directed and funded from Russia. In contrast, it took the West time to establish, specify and verify the facts and to disprove the many lies.

A circumspect approach to information from war zones is, in principle, good practice and serves to avoid journalistic mistakes, the spread of misinformation and unnecessary emotionalization. Sometimes, however, such caution prevents correspondents and commentators from voicing much needed assessments and interpretations in a timely manner. Regardless of the motivation, the West's slow public reaction to the events unfolding in southern and eastern Ukraine left space for Moscow to be filled with disinformation, half-truths and apologist narratives. Many of these, even after having been debunked, still circulate in social and some traditional media outlets today.

The resulting western reluctance to take a position and act on it in 2014–21 was particularly unfortunate with regard to the legal position and political nature of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) – Russia's artificial satellite statelets in the Donbas. The Ukrainian side had been saying for many years that there were no such independent entities as the DNR and the LNR. Both pseudo-states were Russian proxy regimes from the start to their end in September 2022.

Only in late 2022, however, in its ruling on partial admissibility of the MH-17 case, after the DNR and LNR had already disappeared as pseudo-independent entities, did the European Court of Human Rights officially confirm the truth.¹¹ The Court established that Russia had had effective control over the territories of the DNR and the LNR since their creation in May 2014. Throughout the previous almost nine years, the nature of the putative eastern Ukrainian "insurgency" and the "people's republics" had remained a contested issue. It was and sometimes still is controversial in political, academic and other discussions in public forums.

9 Julia Kazdobina, "This Is How Western Media Lose Credibility in Ukraine," *Euromaidan Press*, 11 February 2022. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/02/11/why-nyts-article-about-armed-nationalists-in-ukraine-is-bogus/>.

10 Andreas Umland, "The Far Right in Pre- and Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: From Ultra-Nationalist Party Politics to Ethno-Centric Uncivil Society," *Demokratizatsiya* 28, No. 2, 2020, p. 247-268.

11 "CASE OF UKRAINE AND THE NETHERLANDS v. RUSSIA," *European Court of Human Rights*, 30 November 2022. [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{"itemid":\["001-222889"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{).

Western mirror imaging of Russia

Many Western European politicians are guided by the paradigm of peaceful conflict resolution born out of a post-World War II commitment “never again” to allow war and genocide in Europe. These politicians believed that Russia had learned the same lessons from World War II. The ever more obvious warning signs that Moscow is guided by different values were continuously ignored. Russia’s eventual aims and overall strategy remained unclear until early 2022.

This cognition problem was a result of a still not fully acknowledged fundamental gap between Russian neo-imperial and western post-colonial worldviews. It also flows from a difference between Moscow’s international modus operandi and western post-war strategic culture. Russia’s operational mode is agile, flexible, cynical, amoral and goal-oriented; it is also developed by trial and error. The Kremlin seeks out vulnerabilities that can be exploited and prefers to attack, for as long as possible, below the threshold that triggers retaliation.

Western states and organizations have attempted to deal with the crises emerging from Russian actions on a case-by-case basis and to prioritize the current hot spot. They have not adequately addressed Moscow’s grand design of flexible subversion and the Kremlin’s wider strategy of chaos creation, which lies behind the various individual KGB concepts, such as “active measures”. Initially, some foreign observers were even reluctant to acknowledge that Russia’s incursion into the Donbas constituted a continuation of its annexation of Crimea.

With every week of continuing Russian escalation and new journalistic revelations, however, it became more obvious, throughout 2014, that the armed confrontation in eastern Ukraine had been started deliberately. It became also ever clearer that that the conflict was being covertly maintained by one of the two sides. Nevertheless, there remained – among some, until early 2022 – a naive belief that Russia’s continuing war in eastern Ukraine constituted merely an unfortunate confrontation between equally legitimate but diverging local interests to be resolved through joint negotiation, deliberation and mediation.

Russia manipulating the conflict resolution framework

Pursuing tactics known as “reflexive control” and “escalation control”, the Russian leadership used instrumental aggression through proxies to impose its will on Ukraine and to spread its conceptualization of the conflict among Kyiv’s western partners.¹² Manifestly offensive behaviour alternated with putative de-escalation and feigned concessions to deceive western politicians and diplomats, and to keep them hopeful that peaceful resolution remained possible. For example, at Putin’s request in June 2014 to the upper house of Russia’s parliament, the Federation Council withdrew an earlier permission it had given the President to use Russian troops in Ukraine in March 2014.¹³ This was supposedly to support

12 Andreas Umland, “Reflexive Kontrolle als Königsdisziplin russischer hybrider Kriegführung: Ukrainische Entscheidungsengpässe in einem ‘nichtlinearen’ Konflikt,” *Ukraine-Analysen*, No. 186, 2017, pp. 9–10. <https://laenderanalysen.de/ukraine-analysen/186/reflexive-kontrolle-als-koenigsdisziplin-russischer-hybrider-kriegfuehrung-ukrainische-entscheidungsengpaesse-in-einem-nichtli/>; Jay Ross, “Time to Terminate Escalate to De-Escalate: It’s Escalation Control,” *War on the Rocks*, 24 April 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/time-to-terminate-escalate-to-de-escalateits-escalation-control/>.

13 Kathy Lally, Will Englund and William Booth, “Russian parliament approves use of troops in Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, 1 March 2014. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russian-parliament-approves-use-of-troops-in->

a negotiated solution to the conflict.

Entire units of Russia's regular land forces entered Ukraine on a large scale in mid-August 2014 and continued to be covertly deployed in the Donbas thereafter. On the other hand, the *Novorossiia* (New Russia) project, Moscow's intention to carve out the entire Ukrainian south-east from Kyiv's control, was suspended in October 2014. This change of the Kremlin's rhetoric was perceived by many as a gesture of de-escalation. Yet, it merely constituted a tactical retreat by Moscow. The project was revived eight years later in connection with the "special military operation," and is today being implemented through the undisguised large-scale deployment of Russian regular forces.

Not only in Ukraine, Russia's engagement in bargaining on agreements with its enemy is often accompanied by planned military escalation to exert maximum pressure on the negotiating partner. In the summer of 2014 and winter of 2014–2015, massive incursions of regular Russian troops into Ukraine and onslaughts on Ukrainian troops, in manifest violation of agreements with Kyiv, preceded the Minsk accords. Throughout the talks, Moscow provided reminders of its continuing readiness for aggression and escalation. It actively deployed its regular and proxy forces before, between, throughout and following negotiations until 2022, largely with impunity. At the same time, Moscow kept up its full participation in the Normandy Format, the Trilateral Contact Group (Minsk Process) and two OSCE Special Observation Missions, providing the illusion that a peaceful resolution was still possible.

Russia's dosed and, at times, limited aggression was not a sign of moderation. Instead, it was designed to achieve Russian goals without an open and massive Russian military engagement for as long as possible in order to avoid triggering retaliatory measures. Moscow's putatively conciliatory moves and stall tactics managed to deceive many western observers. The Kremlin's zigzags provided enough grounds for superficially interested diplomats and observers to claim that peaceful resolution of the conflict remained possible. In the meantime, Russia consolidated its control over the captured territories and prepared its next moves.

Self-deception continues after the full-scale invasion

Only after 24 February 2022 did the West wake up to the reality, take decisive action and impose substantive economic sanctions on Russia. Soon after, western countries also started to provide Ukraine with heavy weapons. There had been already good grounds to do so in 2014 when Ukrainian territories were invaded and annexed by Russian regular and irregular troops. Yet, the West relied on an escalation management approach that mistook Russia's subthreshold use of force for a sign of moderation. As a result, the conflict only grew.

Worse, certain types of western self-deception have continued even after the full-scale invasion. For instance, the 2022 Dutch trial of four fighters – three Russian citizens and one Ukrainian citizen – who participated in Russia's operation in Donbas ten years before, leading to the shooting down of Flight MH-17, was an ambiguous procedure. The Dutch investigators, prosecutors and court did an excellent job in establishing the material details of this mass crime. Yet, the trial curiously misassigned responsibility for it to three paramilitary

[crimea/2014/03/01/d1775f70-a151-11e3-a050-dc3322a94fa7_story.html](https://www.rferl.org/content/2014/03/01/d1775f70-a151-11e3-a050-dc3322a94fa7_story.html).

fighters rather than to the Russian army and state.

The Court judged that the three “DPR [Donetsk People’s Republic] combatants and therefore also the accused cannot be regarded as part of the armed forces of the Russian Federation”. It also acknowledged that “the use of a Buk TELAR [...] requires a highly trained crew. Moreover, the weapon cannot be casually deployed”. Nonetheless, the court still decided that it “considers it legally and conclusively proven that [Igor] Girkin [a former FSB officer who had played, as an irregular fighter, an important role in the illegal annexation of Crimea and Russia’s war in eastern Ukraine] was in a position to decide on the deployment and use of the Buk TELAR”.¹⁴

This was an odd conclusion in so far as Girkin and the other paramilitary combatants were in no position to give orders to the regular Russian soldiers operating the Buk system. The responsibility for the mass killing of 298 civilians on board Flight MH-17 lies with the army officers and generals of Russia’s armed forces, as well as their commander-in-chief, Vladimir Putin. The minor Russian or Ukrainian irregular adventurers present on the spot merely assisted the Russian soldiers to orient themselves in eastern Ukraine.

This example illustrates that it is today important to learn and draw adequate conclusions from the experience of Russia’s war in the Donbas in 2014–2022 and from observation of Moscow’s behaviour elsewhere in the post-Soviet space.¹⁵ It is odd that Russian and pro-Russian spokespersons calling for a quick diplomatic solution are still taken seriously while Moscow is daily expanding its occupation of Ukraine whose simple cessation would stop the war. The Russian playbook remains the same: Moscow continues to construct and entrench fake historical narratives, keeps taking advantage of societal tensions and political meekness in its target countries, escalates horizontally, and thereby seeks to thwart a resolute response.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Those who advocate negotiations and a Minsk-style solution to the Russo-Ukrainian War often do so based on the assumption that there is still a stable equilibrium or status quo relationship that could be achieved via simple bargaining with Moscow. This notion is, as is illustrated above, based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the Kremlin’s mindset and policies. The roots of today’s conflict lie in the current Russian regime’s dictatorial and imperialist nature, as well as its fundamental rejection of international law and the European Security Order. The reasons for the conflict are not the result of some unfortunate imbalance, diplomatic mistakes or mutual misunderstanding, the correction of which can easily resolve the conflict. The war is instead determined by the peculiar ideology, structure and legitimacy of Putin’s rule.

14 “Transcript of the MH17 judgment hearing,” *de Rechtspraak*, n. d. <https://www.courtmh17.com/en/insights/news/2022/transcript-of-the-mh17-judgment-hearing/>.

15 Martin Kragh, ed., *Security and Human Rights in Eastern Europe: New Empirical and Conceptual Perspectives on Conflict Resolution and Accountability*. With a foreword by Fredrik Löjdquist (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2023).

This conclusion leads to the following four policy recommendations:

The above story of the escalation in the Donbas and other experiences with Moscow in the post-Soviet space provide important lessons for the interpretation of and resolution to the current large-scale Russo-Ukrainian War. Above all, the war must be universally understood and publicly labelled a “Russia problem” and not a “Ukraine crisis”. This Russian challenge should be addressed and resolved as such.

The West and other foreign observers should not be deceived once again by Moscow, and must not again treat Russian diplomatic, political, societal and military developments as unrelated. The usefulness of such classical instruments of international peace-making as conflict mediation, transformation and pacification needs to be critically assessed in cases of neo-imperial expansionist wars with genocidal aspects.

Based on the failed experiences of previous peace-making efforts, and as long as meaningful negotiations with Russia are impossible, the task of the day is to support Ukraine militarily. This should happen in a way that, when peace talks start, Kyiv can negotiate from a position of strength – unlike in the 2014-2015 Minsk or 2022 Istanbul negotiations. Serious security guarantees and powerful military deterrents should be part of any future peace agreement for Eastern Europe, to ensure that Russia does not use a temporary truce to prepare for a new attack.

Larger resources need to be assigned for the investigation into, publication of, and education about, Russia’s various disruptive and deceptive, public and secret, military and non-military strategies and tactics of subversion, corrosion and expansion. In addition to more effective protection mechanisms, western countries and organizations need to develop whole-of-society counterstrategies that not only shield western societies from Russian and other hybrid threats. They should also actively counter the originators, implementers and distributors of false information, inflammatory speech, escalatory narratives, spy malware, computer viruses, and so on.



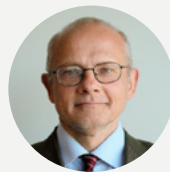
Julia Kazdobina

Julia is a Senior Fellow at Ukrainian Prism's Security Studies Program. As former Advisor to the Information Policy Minister of Ukraine (2016-2019), Julia coordinated the drafting of the government information strategy for Crimea, adopted by the Cabinet in December 2018.



Jakob Hedenskog

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.



Andreas Umland

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

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