

UKRAINE, THE WAR ON THE FOOTSTEP OF EUROPE



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Minsk II: Unhappy Anniversary for Ukraine and the EU

Since March of 2014 war has again raged on the footsteps of Europe, morphing progressively into a kind not witnessed continentally since the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, albeit far greater in scope, destruction and duration. At the recent Munich Security Conference (MSC), Ukraine again featured prominently on the agenda. Specifically, fears from both Russian and western officials were voiced relating to the war spiraling out of control if left on its current trajectory. Apart from the ritual “passing of the buck” relating to the war, and to whom or what blame for it must be assigned, the MSC should not be looked to for policy ramifications or breakthroughs; while Russian and Ukrainian officials met, the planned meeting with German and French opposite numbers (recreating the Normandy Format) was called-off by the French owing to “scheduling conflicts”.

One takeaway from Munich, although far from groundbreaking, was the divide between the United States, and Germany about outlook and strategy, although reassurances by Vice President Pence, Secretary of Defense James Mattis and other speakers were given to the Europeans. In December, US President Donald Trump approved the first lethal arms transfers to Ukraine, not of the much-discussed Javelin fire and forget systems, but M107A1 (Barrett) anti-materiel rifles (neither of which, it should be noted are on the Ukrainian Army’s ‘shopping list’). Conversely, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) caught many off-guard with his statement this weekend that sanctions against the Russian Federation should be eased in step with progress in implementing Minsk II, a proposal that would significantly undermine the sanctions regimes.

Since the abortive Minsk I and Minsk II Agreements of September 2014 and February 2015, a state described variously as a “ceasefire”, “conflict”, “crisis”, “frozen conflict” or most egregiously this weekend in Munich as an “insurgency” has been declared by academics, government officials and media pundits alike. Despite the alterations in rhetoric, this state of affairs has remained unchanged in 2018. Attempts to categorize the violence in eastern Ukraine as anything other than what it truly is (war) are perplexing and logic defying. Ukraine is the black elephant in the room. Ukraine is the war on the footsteps of Europe.

On this 3rd anniversary of Minsk II (the ceasefire arising from the agreement was set for 00.00 local time on February 15th 2015) it is prudent to examine how this agreement still clung to by officials from Germany, France and other European nations has failed, and why war does indeed rage in Europe.

Let slip the hounds of war

To emphasize the above, a fifteen-day period (01-15 February) for the past three years (2016, 2017 and 2018) has been examined, using the less-than-comprehensive, albeit useful Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe Special Monitoring Mission (OSCE SMM) daily reports.

The OSCE SMM, composed of international observers (a number of whom come from military backgrounds) operates across separatist occupied and unoccupied Ukraine to monitor the “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements” referred to within this analysis as the Implementation Package. In the period for 2018, SMM observers recorded an average of 185 and 345 explosions per day across occupied Lugansk and Donetsk. On 2 February alone, 1,100 explosions were documented in Donetsk, and 5 days later, SMM observers in Lugansk cataloged 1,740. Compared to 2017, these numbers are down in Donetsk (from 1,225 per day), however, up in Lugansk (from 125 per day). Nevertheless, the numbers for 2018 remain noticeably higher than those for 2016 (33 and 267 per day in Lugansk and Donetsk,).

Explosions are frequently marked as “undetermined”, however, originate from multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), tank, or artillery rounds (the latter, primarily 120 mm and 152 mm) and rocket grenades/automatic grenade launchers. The majority of these systems (MLRS, tanks as well as heavy artillery of a caliber 100 mm and above) are prohibited from operating within the disengagement area and per the Implementation Package and should be based in withdrawal zones 50-70 kilometers away from the contact line which (roughly) separates Ukrainian government forces from the Russian-backed separatists.

Explosions are just one of the manifold daily violations of the Implementation Package. Specifically, the above figures do not include exchanges of small arms, heavy machine gun, or IFV (infantry fighting vehicle) cannon fire. Frequently, SMM reports include the phrase “multiple bursts”, a colloquialism that most likely alludes to the intensity and frequency of firefights; in certain instances shots and bursts are individually counted, in most cases, however, the adjective “multiple” is applied. Hundreds, if not thousands of rounds are exchanged on less “quiet” days.

In all three years compared, during the same 15 day period in February, members of the SMM were either fired upon (almost certainly inadvertently, a result of being ‘too close’ to fighting), or threatened while performing or seeking (and being unable) to perform their duties.

Additionally, SMM unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) were shot at and/or disabled by ground fire on multiple occasions within the same period. Violations appear to occur more frequently within the separatist-held territories (perhaps 60%-70% of all violations emanate from within separatist occupied territory, compared to 30-40% within government held territory). SMM UAVs are frequent targets of both separatist and Ukrainian pot shots.

In summation, the harassment of international monitors, prevention from carrying out their duties and mission, and daily exchanges of fire more resemble regular combat than any sort of ceasefire.

Further, limited forays primarily undertaken by the Ukrainian armed forces into the so-called ‘grey zone’, as evidenced at the time of writing in the village of Novoaleskandrivka which was returned to Ukrainian control on the 16th of February 2018, highlight that war in Ukraine is indeed ‘hot’ and not frozen.. Compared to the other post-Soviet “frozen conflicts”, in and of itself a highly contentious term, the War in Donbass has never assumed a crystallized character and remains violent and unpredictable nearly 4 years on.

Fighting in Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia largely, if entirely abated following ceasefire and peace agreements, which roughly coincided with the cessation of hostilities. While the latter two conflicts notably flared up in 2004 and 2008, these periods were marked by brief, dramatic, and decisive clashes, not protracted and incessant static warfare exemplified by the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, which lasted 5 days.

The only post-Soviet “frozen conflict” which bears some similarities in duration and consistency to the War in Ukraine/Donbass is the Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan, however, even there, daily exchanges of fire or artillery on the scale witnessed in eastern Ukraine are wholly absent as is the sustained intensity of violence.

The costs of War

With regards to casualties, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) noted a 3.6% increase in civilian casualties (deaths and injuries) attributable to combat in Ukraine for 2017 compared to 2016 (544, 2017; 525, 2016). As of December 2017, 3,780 deaths are noted in a Book of Memory for Ukrainian combat personnel. On the separatist side, this number is likely similar, albeit slightly higher. Unfortunately, reliable figures do not exist for separatist casualties and estimates vary between 3,500 and 4,200 separatists killed in action (KIA) with anywhere between 500-1,000 additional Russian KIA. All told, it is safe to assume that 8,000-10,000 combatants of all flags have lost their lives, while perhaps another 2,500-3,000 civilians have perished. This speaks nothing of the (tens of) thousands of wounded or the nearly 1,000,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) within Ukraine.

In digesting the above figures, it becomes apparent that Ukraine, a European nation, is at war and has been for several years. The intensity and frequency of violence, the number of casualties, and combatant KIA only underscore the veracity of the War in Ukraine/Donbass.

The ‘roadmap(s) to peace’ drawn up within the Normandy Format (France, Germany, Russian Federation, Ukraine) and presented via the Minsk I and Minsk II agreements have failed fantastically. The only factor, which changed following Minsk II, was the cessation of large-scale mobile (offensive) operations or exchanges of territory. In fact, during the signing of Minsk II the Battle of Debaltseve raged entering its most fevered pitch *after* the document should have come into force on the 15th of February. This last major battle secured a strategically vital corridor and allowed the separatists to consolidate their new ‘republics’, negating the need for further offensive operations. Whether static or fluid, declared or undeclared, war does rage on the doorstep of the European Union in 2018.

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