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Why and How a Combined UN/EU Peacekeeping Mission Could Disentangle the Donbas Conundrum

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How to solve the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in the Donets Basin? Until now, the international community – the OSCE, and especially Germany and France, within the so-called Normandy Format – has been trying to mediate bilateral talks between Kyiv and Moscow. The activities of the so-called Contact Group, with considerable support from Berlin and Paris, have led to the well-known Minsk Agreements. With the delay, these agreements have, in combination with other factors, such as the collapse of world energy prices and growing effects of Western sanctions on Russia, achieved a decline of military activity since summer 2015. Yet, the agreements have neither led to a full ceasefire, nor to any serious steps towards a return, under Kyiv's control, of the occupied areas and the Russian-Ukrainian border in the Donbas.

So far, not even a mere freezing of the conflict, along the examples of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, is in sight. Instead, low-intensity exchange of fire lingers on, on a daily basis. Ukrainian soldiers continue to die or being wounded along a still fluid demarcation line between



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the Ukrainian army and “separatists” forces. The latter consist mainly of Kremlin-paid mercenaries, former Ukrainian criminals, pro-Moscow extremist volunteers, forced local conscripts, and ordinary Russian soldiers. The territories of the so-called “people’s republics” of Luhansk and Donetsk are sinking deeper into misery and chaos, by the month. The latter development, as well as the deepening of the Russian economic crisis and Kremlin’s related desire to reduce Western sanctions, have led to some softening of Moscow’s position.

Against this background, in recent weeks, Kyiv has returned to a previously discussed, instrument to pacify and recover the currently occupied territories of Ukraine’s east. Kyiv believes that the conduct of a large UN peace operation in the Donbas could constitute a realistic path towards solving at least this particular territorial conflict with Russia on mainland Ukraine. On January 4, 2016, Volodymyr Yelchenko, the newly appointed Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the UN, while presenting his credentials to the UN Secretary General, reiterated Ukraine’s request for more active engagement in Ukraine. On January 23, 2016, the UN sent an assessment mission to Ukraine. What are the chances for a UN peace mission in Eastern Ukraine to be successful, if – and that is a big “if”, considering Moscow’s veto power – the UN Security Council approved of it?

An advance caveat concerning this “if”: It would obviously be important whether Russia would agree to such a mission and, if so, under which conditions. The last two years have illustrated Putin’s determination to achieve his destructive objectives in Ukraine. Therefore, Moscow will support the idea of an international peace mission only in case and for as long as it serves, what is in the Kremlin understood urgent Russian “national interests,” i.e. could prolong the life of Russia’s current kleptocratic regime. Given these premises, the main challenge for Western and Ukrainian leaders is to create and maintain an environment in which the Kremlin would see a peaceful and sustainable solution for the Donbas as an option preferable to new escalation, further continuation or mere freezing of the conflict.

In other words, the Kremlin has to come to the conclusion that it wants to get rid of the Donbas issue. Once Moscow is ready to withdraw, at least, from eastern Ukraine, it will make sense to search for instruments allowing Putin or his successor to save his or her face before the Russian domestic audience. In that connection, the advantage of the UN as an international organization is not only that it has rich experience in peace operations around the globe. The UN includes Russia, as the crucial instigator, behind the “people’s republics” in Eastern Ukraine, in a crucial role, as permanent Security Council member. Russia could thus be a prominent part of a process within which the West will have to prevent the Kremlin from making this UN operation a mockery.

Since 1948, the UN has worldwide conducted 71 operations consisting of either of these three components, or their combination: peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peace-building. As of 31 December 2015, there were 16 UN peace operations active around the globe. The total number of personnel deployed, over the decades, has been more than 125 thousand, including 91,140 military troops, 13,854 police officers, and 1,836 military observers. Only some of these missions were a clear success, others succeeded in part. A number of them were failures – some so with grave consequences for the peacekeepers and civilians whom they could not protect.



Often, the United Nations Transitional Administration in Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES) is mentioned among the most successful UN peacekeeping missions. One of us, Oleksiy Melnyk, served, in April-August 1996, within the UNTAES HQ, in charge of two Ukrainian helicopter squadrons of the mission. Russia too was a significant member of this mission. The history, parameters and operation of UNTAES can be suggestive concerning a possible future similar UN mission to Eastern Ukraine.

UNTAES was set up in 1996 in order to implement a so-called Basic Agreement on the re-integration, into the Croatian state, of a small East Slavonian region terrorized by Serb armed groups. Its main task, on the initial stage, was to keep peace and provide security in the region in order to create basic pre-conditions for an implementation of the Basic Agreement. A circa 5000-men strong military component, 500 police personnel and approx. 100 military observers were deployed in a relatively small area of 30 km E-W and 70 km N-S. Four full-sized battalions, two helicopter squadrons (including 10 Ukrainian Mi-24 attack helicopters), as well as one tank company, constituted an impressive force both, to create a sense of protection, from possible Croatian attacks, among local Serb residents, and to prevent aggressive actions by Serbian militias.

Within one month after full deployment, the first stage of de-weaponization of the region was complete. All heavy guns were either removed to Serbia or handed over for disposal. UNTAES's continuing de-militarization was so successful that, only a few months later, UN Force Commander General Schoups reported that "the single existing military organization in the region is the UNTAES military component." After local gangs had been dissolved, the civilian part of the UN mission secured safe return of refugees and IDPs, created a temporary police force (paid in *Deutschmarks*) and provided provisional civil administration as well as public services.

How was this achieved? Among other heavy military equipment, Ukrainian Mi-24 helicopters armed with 23-mm cannons conducted regular patrols along a separation line. On a number of occasions, UNTAES's Belgian, Russian, Jordanian, Pakistani and Ukrainian troops were called to show up when there were attempts not to obey the Agreement, such as in a confrontation with the notorious Serb paramilitary unit "Scorpions." Additional measures of military reinforcement were demonstrated to all parties. For instance, NATO aircraft every second week conducted close air support training. The jets simulated ground attacks in areas bordering Serbia and Croatia specifically to be heard and seen by remaining armed combatants.

Being a potential external spoiler of the peace process, Serbia was pressured by the international community to play a cooperative role, and to cease its support for local separatists. This task was eased by the fact that the UNTAES-controlled region was naturally isolated from Serbia by the Danube River. Unnoticed border-crossing of heavy weaponry or large troops from Serbia to Eastern Slavonia was thus impossible. These experiences illustrate that a UN peace operation in the Donbas could be more or far more challenging than UNTAES's task in Croatia.

In view of respective provisions and aims of the Minsk Agreements, one should also point out the importance of a finely calibrated political process. For example, securing local elections was, in Eastern Slavonia, the last point in the peacekeeping mission's plan of action. That means that elections were held only after full demilitarization, a political stabilization of the region, set-up of a local police force, and the creation of conditions necessary for a safe return of refugees. In April



1997, UNTAES provided over 150 election observers to all polling stations, where about 72,000 votes were cast.

Based on UNTAES's and other UN peace operations' experiences of deployment, one can imagine that a peacekeeping mission, in the so-called "people's republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, would require large-scale international engagement. For instance, a possible UN troops and police deployment would have to be much more massive than in Eastern Slavonia in 1996-1997, in order to be successful. A simple multiplication, based on the UNTAES deployment, would lead to an estimated need of more than 50,000 troops – an enormous number of military personnel not readily available.

Moreover, it would be important for such a mission's success that full deployment starts within few months after an agreement on the operation has been reached, and that the mission's mandate is sufficiently robust. Such a mission's purpose could further be complicated by the fact that it may not be sufficient to secure a separation of forces. It might also be necessary to create a temporary international military and civilian administration on the territory of the Donbas during which refugees could return, local police forces would be created, elections be conducted, etc. A partial solution to tackling such a range of issues could be to combine a UN mission with a parallel, attached or included EU military and/or civilian operation under the Common Security and Defence Policy.

While it may not be necessary to mobilize as many as 50,000 UN or/and EU troops, the armed component of such a mission would have to be sufficiently large, in order to make sense. In their paper "United Nations Peacekeeping Dynamics and the Duration of Post-Conflict Peace," Lisa Hultman (Uppsala University), Jacob Kathman (SUNY) and Megan Shannon (Florida State University) find that "as the number of UN military troops deployed increases, the chance of civil war recurring decreases." They, therefore, advise that, instead of merely sending unarmed observers, the UN should, when conducting peacekeeping missions worldwide, "deploy larger amounts of armed troops." That is because they found that massive UN deployment of properly military units "seem to be associated with mitigating the information and commitment problems [among the combatants] that lead to the recurrence of civil war."

Further comparative research has established that it is also relevant to the success of such operations how successful the international negotiations, before the missions' actual start, were, and what the strength of their civilian components (peace-building) is. In other words, when all involved parties are on board, a significant amount of armed UN troops has been mobilized, non-military conflict resolution is being mediated, civilian police forces start operating, democratic elections lead to legitimate rule, and state institution-building in the conflict area is beginning, and sustainable stabilization can be achieved. Various broadly political, in addition purely military, aspects of such missions pre-determine their success or failure in securing post-conflict peace and preventing a new spread of violence.

Against the background of the unsuccessful Minsk process and relatively good record of certain previous UN missions, a well-negotiated, -mandated and -armed UN peacekeeping operation that includes a significant civilian component might be Europe's best chance to achieve soon peace on its Eastern border. Such an operation should not only be approved by the UN Security Council but



have also the political, material and personnel support of the European Union. A combined UN/EU mission would constitute a genuine chance for the Donbas to end the misery of a terroristic occupation, and Ukraine's only realistic way to recover its lost eastern territories, in the near future. The Ukrainian state and other involved international actors, such as Germany or the OSCE, have shown that they are too weak to solve these tasks by themselves. Therefore, a combination of a UN peacekeeping mission with an EU CSDP operation as well as with large-scale engagement of potent development organizations (Worldbank, EBRD, USAID, GIZ etc.) in the Donets Basin, should become a priority in the West's attempts to end the ongoing armed confrontation between Kyiv and Moscow, in eastern Ukraine.

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