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The Russian Military Escalation around Ukraine's Donbas

Risks and Scenarios for a Revised EU Policy

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The ongoing military and political escalations in and around Donbas – including the increase in Russian military deployments near Ukraine's borders – represent one of the most severe security crises in Europe since Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. The patterns of Russian military deployments, the structure of forces, and the types of observed military hardware strongly suggest the risk of an offensive operation rather than an exercise. Given the existing political costs, that operation is likely to take indirect forms by using the cover of Russian military proxies in Donbas. This crisis represents both a major challenge and an opportunity for the European Union (EU) to conduct practical work on developing its strategic autonomy and offer leadership in strengthening the security in its immediate neighbourhood. What should the EU do in practical terms to discourage further military escalation around Donbas, or at least increase the costs for such a development?

By the end of March, the international public was alarmed by reports of an ongoing military escalation in Ukraine's Donbas. The *New York Times* wrote that an intensive exchange of artillery and machine-gun fire had occurred, killing four Ukrainian soldiers. Several high-profile political statements were issued. The Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, urged Germany and France — two participants of the Normandy Format talks — to make efforts to help preserve the ceasefire regime. Russia's presidential spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, acknowledged the increasing tension along the Contact Line and expressed hope that this will not escalate into full-fledged fighting. Whereas, the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, issued a very strong statement, saying that any attempt to renew the military conflict in Donbas "could destroy Ukraine".

Interestingly, the data on the nature and intensity of ceasefire violations, as reported by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), revealed an even higher spike in shelling incidents on 12 March (around 200). However, it did not receive as much attention as the number of shelling incidents on 25 March (around 150), which was the highest at the end of that month.

This could be explained by differences in observation data — as collected by the OSCE

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and the combatant sides — because OSCE observers do not have access to, nor a presence along, the whole Line of Contact. Most likely though, the general distress at the end of March was caused by a combination of factors, including the shelling incidents, the killing of Ukrainian soldiers, and, most importantly, the reports about Russian troops amassing near the Ukrainian border.

Western Reactions

In response to the failure of the Russian military to leave the border area with Ukraine after it finished drills on 23 March, the US European Command reportedly elevated its watch level to the highest one — indicating a potential imminent crisis. These concerns proved credible when multiple social media sources reported extensive movements of Russian military hardware from various military districts towards Ukraine and the occupied Crimea. The reports were aggregated by the Conflict Intelligence Team, which has been monitoring the recent movements of troops across Russia. More recently, the Russian military has been setting up military camps with field hospitals in the proximity of Ukrainian borders, which may be a sign of preparation for combat operations. The movement of more than 10 amphibious and artillery boats from the Caspian to the Black Sea, "for military drills", is another disturbing step.

This Russian military build-up around Ukrainian borders led to German Chancellor Angela Merkel requesting that President Vladimir Putin withdraw troops to deescalate the emerging crisis. The situation is indeed perceived as critical, given that US President Joe Biden had earlier called President Zelensky to express his support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, also reached out to Ukraine's leadership, revealing the deep concerns in the West about Russian military movements.

Against the backdrop of these developments, various experts and observers have attempted to understand Russia's actions and their desired outcomes. Some of the most frequently quoted interpretations have suggested that Russia's actions could be posturing and a test by the Kremlin of the Biden administration; that the developments represent Russia's coercive posturing in its attempt to pressure Ukraine and the West over the lack of progress in implementing the Minsk II agreement; that Russia's actions reveal its diplomatic pressure against the EU as well as an attempt to decouple the United States from its European allies; or that Russia is likely trying to provoke Ukraine to escalate a military confrontation in Donbas, which it consequently intends to use as a pretext to move in its "peacekeepers". An often presented perspective of Russian experts indicates that the recent military escalations reveal Russia's efforts to demonstrate that it would respond with force to any attempts to change the status quo in Donbas.

Considering these and other expert views, there seems to be significant convergence towards the idea that overt aggression of the Russian military against Ukraine is not very likely. In fact, there seems to be broad agreement that the Kremlin's escalatory actions indicate an attempt by Russia to threaten the EU and the United States into pressing Ukraine to make concessions over the implementation of the 2015 Minsk documents. More precisely, that view implies that Russia is implicitly blackmailing the West — to either push Ukraine's authorities into giving special status to the Kremlin's proxies in eastern Ukraine, or be faced with further military escalation.

The Failure of Russia's Political Tool

There are a few important nuances that these assessments may be overlooking. By carefully examining the political context behind the escalation, the military posturing, the deployment patterns of Russian

forces, and their structure, one could bring more clarity about the sought outcomes. To start with, we shall consider that any military operation is simply a tool for advancing a specific political goal.

However, the essential political objectives of Russia in relation to the war in Donbas have not changed since the initiation of that armed conflict in 2014. In his recent videoconference with Chancellor Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, the Russian president insisted that the most important step is the establishment of a direct dialogue between Ukraine's authorities and the "Lugansk and Donetsk regions" on their special status.

This is the same key message that Putin had advanced previously, in 2015. Earlier, in January of this year, the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, threatened that Russia will change its approach towards Ukraine if France and Germany do not "bring to reason" Ukraine's leadership and make it fulfil its obligations in line with the Minsk agreements. These steps seem to reveal Russia's key goals in the negotiations over the war in Donbas.

First, it is to provide legally binding and effective autonomy to its proxies in Ukraine's Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Then, it is to legally conceal its role as the main protagonist of the armed aggression in Ukraine's Donbas by establishing formal direct talks between the Ukrainian government and Moscow's proxies in Donbas, which will solidify the "civil conflict" myth advanced by Russia.

At the time of Lavrov's statements in January, these Russian aims in Ukraine were implemented via two approaches: a military one — through the conflict mechanism in Donbas — and a political one. The political aim has been advanced particularly through the activities of the Ukrainian oligarch and politician Viktor Medvedchuk, who is a "personal friend" of Vladimir Putin and has been a driving political proxy that Russia has cultivated over the last few years in Ukraine. To close that channel of Russian influence, the Ukrainian authorities imposed sanctions against businesses and the media structures of Medvedchuk in February 2021, thus considerably undermining his influence on Ukraine's political processes. This has been a severe blow against Russian attempts to bring the Donbas war to a conclusion it prefers, via direct control over Ukraine's domestic politics. The control was to be achieved by bringing Medvedchuk and his "Opposition Platform — For Life" political party into power. The logic of this political approach is similar to the idea that if you cannot conquer a fortress, you can corrupt it and erode its ability to defend itself.

That approach basically copies Russia's strategy in Moldova, where Moscow funded and supported the accession into power of another of its proxies — former Moldovan president Igor Dodon and his Party of Socialists. Russian authorities were very critical of sanctions against Medvedchuk, revealing his importance to the Kremlin's political designs in Ukraine. For instance, Chairman of the Russian Security Council and former president Dmitry Medvedev expressed public dissatisfaction with the sanctions against Medvedchuk following their phone conversation.

By eroding Medvedchuk's growing influence in Ukraine, the Zelensky administration significantly undermined Russia's plans to legalise its military proxies in Ukraine's Luhansk and Donbas regions in the near future. This would likely happen if Medvedchuk and his party were to come to power, which would then allow Russia to acquire effective influence over Ukraine's domestic processes and politics.

It does not mean that a Russian proxy in Ukraine needs to openly express pro-Russian beliefs. It can acquire public support by adopting the label of a "party of peace" and by exploiting the growing war fatigue of the average Ukrainian voter. Having failed in that political design, Russia reverted to the option of military threats. For instance, Dmitry Peskov directly connected the two issues by stating that sanctions against Medvedchuk "could lead to a military solution in Donbas". It is within this wider political context that a spike in cease-

fire violations in Donbas is emerging in parallel with an unprecedented concentration of Russian forces around Ukraine's borders.

The Viable Military Proxy Option

It is difficult for policy analysts to accurately observe military and security-related activities. However, the earlier referred to reaction of the US military's European Command in response to the deployments of Russian military troops to Ukraine's borders was very revealing. Given the US military's intelligence capabilities, this suggests that the deployments are out of the ordinary, despite the latest attempts by Russian authorities to claim routine military activities.

Russia's explanations are not credible for a number of reasons. Considerable evidence indicates that Russia is conducting an extensive logistical operation to transport military hardware in the direction of Ukraine from large distances, including from other military districts. It makes no sense to bring the military units of the Central Military District to the Western or Southern ones for routine exercises, or to move troops from the Western to the Southern Military District for the same purpose. As a rule, each military district conducts its training and verifications inside its designated geographic area, except during strategic exercises. Moreover, the scale of these movements is so large that Russia's producers of agricultural equipment have insufficient railway transportation capacity and complain that the Ministry of Defence has exhausted these for its own use. Finally, it is important to explore the nature of the deployment, which includes multiple launch rocket systems, self-propelled artillery, tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, fuel trucks, and mobile hospitals. This suggests preparations for offensive military activities, consistent with previous major engagements in Ukraine by Russia — such as the offensive against Debaltseve, for instance.

Importantly, the deliveries of military hardware from the Central Military District — which covers parts of Siberia, where the Russian military stockpiles its old military equipment — would suggest that Russia is transporting older types of combat platforms. Russia has upgraded the Western and Southern Military Districts with its most modern combat hardware. Russian military planners prefer not to use its modern combat platforms to equip its military proxies in Ukraine's Donbas, as this would easily reveal Moscow's involvement, creating extra irritations between Russia and the West, and undermining Russia's deniability efforts. Therefore, we are very likely observing an ongoing supply of Russian proxies in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions with older Soviet-made military hardware and munitions, suggesting the preparation for combat activities.

Based on this, the existing assertions by many policy experts — that a Russian military operation against Ukraine is unlikely — are not accurate. Although Russia's political costs for overt military aggression against Ukraine are indeed very high — making this type of military action less feasible — it has an alternative course of action. Russia conducted a few military operations in Ukraine by disguising its regular troops as "Donetsk rebels", moving Russian military troops and hardware across the Ukrainian border. A few of the most well-known cases are the August 2014 battle of Ilovaisk and the January—February 2015 fighting over Debaltseve, including several cases of Russian artillery strikes against Ukraine from Russian territory.

Moreover, the prolonged combat operations that have been sustained by the "Donetsk rebels" during the last seven years would have been impossible without the constant resupply of munitions for rifles, artillery, fighting vehicles, and tanks, as well as fuel. The massive concentration of Russian troops at Ukraine's borders makes it easier to conceal the movement of these military supplies into Ukraine's Donbas. In fact, this is the most likely explanation for Russia's choice to conduct the exercises and movements in the proximity of Ukraine's borders. It provides cover for transporting its troops and munitions to the border area.

Russia then has the liberty of moving them across the more than 400 km segment of border shared with Ukraine, which is controlled by Russian proxies in Donbas — the OSCE only monitors two border crossing points in the Gukovo area.

Military Actions Revive the Political Option

Therefore, the existing public discussions over the risks of a full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine are misleading and unhelpful. They cannot contribute to the building of an effective strategy to discourage and counter Russian military involvement in Donbas. Russia can lead and conduct military operations against Ukraine — including for limited territorial conquest — by using the "civil war" cover and its armed proxies in eastern Ukraine. Any analysis of Russian military attacks against Ukraine should be conducted predominantly within the framework of this option.

Discarding the risk of a Russian military operation against Ukraine based solely on the publicly reported numbers of Russian troops near Ukraine's borders is also erroneous. For instance, the often seen reference to "additional 4,000 Russian troops" and the consequent conclusion that this number is not sufficient for offensive operations is missing the point. The number is a conservative estimate by US intelligence and only provides a snapshot of the overall picture. It represents incomplete information — a suggestion that is confirmed by the fact that the US military command in Europe elevated its watch level to the highest status. Moreover, what should not be ignored is that there are Russian troops in Donbas on permanent rotation. Otherwise, it would be impossible to man much of the high-tech military equipment, the presence of which is routinely reported based on OSCE unmanned aerial vehicle observations in Donbas. Finally, numbers should be analysed in context. For instance, at one point during the August 2014 Ukrainian offensive, Russia reportedly deployed some eight autonomous battalion tactical groups (a 6,000–7,000-strong force), with massive artillery support, which significantly changed the course of the operation.

Moreover, Russian forces fighting on behalf of the "separatist republics" in Donbas would only have to concentrate a military strike against a small front in Ukrainian defences to break through. By gradually gaining limited terrain, Russia would inflict political costs on the incumbent Ukrainian authorities, who would lose popular support. This would also bring back Russia's political option for Ukraine into play, by increasing the popularity of a political force that is sympathetic to Russia and marketed as a "party of peace".

Of course, this option has intermediate stages over a continuum of military options, in which Russia can attempt to obtain concessions by threatening military escalation, gradually escalating violence in Donbas, and then further increasing the scope and intensity of its military actions there. What could the West do to assist Ukraine in managing and mitigating this security challenge?

Strategic Context and Strategy Options

As a defence alliance, NATO has concrete mechanisms and tools to deal with crises similar to the one developing around Ukraine's Donbas. In fact, the Alliance has been engaging Ukraine in diverse defence cooperation programmes. However, NATO is less equipped to address the political dimension related to this crisis, which is of chief importance, since Ukraine is not a NATO member state.

Under these challenging conditions, what would be the most effective policy options for the EU? Given its overall passive reaction to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh last year, the EU should use this crisis as an opportunity. It provides the EU with the chance to constructively and practically engage its strategic autonomy framework. It should do this by operating as a leader that

brings its member states, but also its partners, around the table. This can be done by driving the agenda and designing a course of action to manage this crisis that has developed in its immediate neighbourhood.

The emergence of revisionist regional powers has brought back into relevance and prominence the question of hard power in foreign policy. It proved effective in creating new facts on the ground, despite the political opposition of other states and the restrictions of international law. Therefore, the EU would benefit from learning how to effectively deal with countries that use hard power to bring changes that are detrimental to the EU's interests. Because of the growing influence of hard power in international affairs, and given the logic of sunk costs that drives its economic lobby groups, the EU risks being forced to gradually accept the new changes imposed by Russia (and other similar actors), albeit tacitly.

Given its past experience with the EU, Russia understands well this dynamic and is eager to exploit it. Hence, the EU needs to break down this vicious circle and change Russia's way of thinking. The most optimal course of action for the EU, then, would be to communicate credibly that it is willing and capable of elevating the costs if Russia attempts to change the status quo through military means.

Even if this fails in one instance — and it may be costly to implement — this approach will significantly increase the EU's deterrence capability in future crises. The biggest challenge is the fact that, from the point of view of the Russian authorities, the collective EU is not credible in its commitment to impose costs. To counter this, the EU leadership would have to cultivate and encourage "coalitions of the willing" among its member states, which would provide military assistance and perhaps the assurance of defence support to Ukraine. To facilitate that, the EU could explore its individual members' niche interests or use issue-linkage strategies to help member states converge their interests on specific areas or policies. As an example, although France has limited policy interests related to the EU's eastern flank, it has been deploying forces to the Baltic states as part of the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP). The issue-linking mechanism that encouraged French participation was, among others, the Estonian contribution to the French-led Operation Barkhane in Mali. The EU could explore that logic and apply it to compensate for the costs of some member states, thus encouraging their more active involvement in assisting Ukraine. For this purpose, the EU could offer its institutional framework as a coordination hub for such compensations.

Outlook and Policy Options

In practice, this can take different shapes and build on already existing platforms, such as the Baltic states' efforts on defence assistance for Ukraine. The EU's permanent structured cooperation mechanism could serve as the legal and operational channel for increased defence cooperation between selected EU member states and Ukraine, including on domains such as capabilities and operations. As another concrete option, article 44 of the Treaty on European Union presents the opportunity for the Council to launch an emergency operation of a military nature just with the support of a group of willing member states. This tool is particularly useful for the EU should Russia decide to militarily escalate the ongoing crisis around Donbas, as it allows for a quicker reaction and response.

It is very important for the EU to lead and coordinate this kind of support and engagement because this would allow it to develop and consolidate the appropriate mechanisms, procedures, and tools for its strategic autonomy process. Fortunately, the EU has recently approved a new Common Foreign and Security Policy financial instrument — the European Peace Facility — which extends its practical abilities to assist Ukraine. With its €5 billion in funds over the next seven years (2021—2027), the European Peace Facility can cover the costs of EU military missions and operations; it can

also provide bilateral military and defence assistance, including via military equipment, to any EU partner that faces major security challenges and that the EU decides to support.

Of course, the institutional framework for such EU—Ukraine engagements is not yet fully developed. However, the EU could establish a bilateral partnership with Ukraine on defence and security policy along the lines of what was proposed recently by Portugal vis-à-vis the United Kingdom, and comparable to those in place with Norway and Canada. Under this partnership, if Ukraine were willing to accept, individual EU member states (or a group of states) could sign an agreement with Kyiv to deploy forces on a rotational basis to the Ukrainian—Belarus border, thereby assisting Ukraine in covering this segment, similar to the work of the NATO EFP. This would allow Ukraine to free up additional troops for deployment to the Donbas Contact Line, increasing its deterrence capacity against Russian military escalations. In a similar fashion, individual EU countries could assist Ukraine in the patrolling of its Black Sea shores on a rotational basis.

Although these and some similar options may seem striking at first glance, they represent completely legitimate partnerships in accordance with international law and would increase the EU's engagement in securing its neighbourhood though bilateral assistance to Ukraine. Creativity may be required in order to build the concrete policy tools necessary for this to happen in the framework of the EU's existing procedures. As an example of a creative and confident approach, the EU could design a different type of EU Common Security and Defence Policy mission to assist Ukraine in dealing with Russian-led military escalation in Donbas; or it could change the mandate of one of the existing missions in Ukraine (EU Advisory Mission or EU Border Assistance Mission). Both a voiced intention and the development of these mechanisms would strengthen the EU's ability to discourage military escalations by Russia, thereby signalling resolve and commitment. This type of partnership in defence and security areas between the EU and Ukraine would not be as threatening to Russia as Ukraine's membership in NATO, it would receive less opposition from the more conservative Ukrainian audience, and it would allow the EU to actually transition from sterile discussions about developing its strategic autonomy to concrete exercises that actually establish its related mechanisms, procedures, and capabilities.

Another creative option for EU engagement would be the exploration of an existing international legal framework. For instance, the EU could initiate and lead a follow-up stage of negotiations — in line with the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances — and discuss concrete defence assistance for Ukraine in line with that agreement, attracting eventually the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. This may look like a less traditional approach for the EU, but it encompasses its preference for legal solutions with the urge to develop a more robust strategic culture and capabilities. Besides, while the previously listed measures contributed to the "hardware" element of the EU's strategic autonomy, this step would allow the EU to develop its related "software" — to initiate and lead international legal frameworks that consolidate the security in its neighbourhood and the wider Eurasia region.

Furthermore, the EU could engage Ukraine in negotiations that identify ways for providing as well as the stages of concrete defence assistance to Ukraine, the establishment of early warning and trigger mechanisms for crisis response, as well as a clear process for the involvement of guarantor states. In times of crisis escalation, this involvement may take a number of forms, including the deployment of an operation similar to the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia that can discourage a further Russian military offensive. If this necessity arises, it will likely mean the withdrawal of Ukraine, the EU, and their transatlantic partners from the ongoing OSCE operation, which emerged as a framework that unintentionally results in greatly

facilitating Russia's existing interest to control the negotiations format over the war in Donbas. Because Russia favours the OSCE's participation to any other organisation, due to its veto right at regular stages of the process, an EU—Ukraine *conditional* agreement on replacing the OSCE operation due to an armed escalation triggered by Russia could in itself serve as a powerful deterrent against such undesired military developments. Although many risk-averse EU member states may be reluctant to discuss the potential and conditional replacement of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine with an EU mission, they need consider the alternatives, which are worse than what used to be the status quo. Only the concern of losing its current level of control over the negotiations process related to the armed conflict in Donbas could force Russia to check its temptation to conduct military escalations.

The above suggestions are examples of creating real costs in response to Russia's attempts to change the status quo via military means. It is only by enacting clear mechanisms that would bind the EU to respond to Russia's military actions — by tying its hands politically — that the European Union can credibly discourage military escalation against Ukraine or other countries in the ex-Soviet space.

The logic of hard power implies that an effective response would require a credible commitment by the EU to create costs, which would be possible by deploying its own hard power. And the emerging crisis around Ukraine's Donbas region provides the EU with both challenges and opportunities in this regard.

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