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## **The Ukraine Conflict and the Problems of War Termination**

*The war in the east of Ukraine is now in its fifth year and, despite the cost-benefit logic for both sides of securing a peace, the chances of terminating this conflict remain remote. Using the theoretical literature on war termination, this article demonstrates that the problems of resolving the conflict in the Donbas lie in complex structural issues that are not easy to resolve. In order to make this argument this article examines the problems of bringing the conflict to an end by framing the problems according to four key questions: is war working for the belligerents; is there a peace to be made; is peace too costly; and, can the war be stopped?*

The war in eastern Ukraine is now in its fifth year and shows no immediate signs of ending. Yet one might think that this was a conflict ripe for some kind of resolution. States fight wars because they believe that it will advance their interests – that the benefits will outweigh the costs. The conflict in Ukraine has, however, devolved into a costly war of attrition in which neither seems to be in a position to prevail. Rationally, it would seem logical for both sides to cut their losses and reach a settlement; in that sense, therefore, it shouldn't be any more difficult to end the war in Ukraine than it was to start it. Indeed, there have been signs of what appears to be an apparent interest by both sides in reaching an accommodation. In 2017 the Russians circulated a draft resolution to UN Security Council members for a limited UN peacekeeping operation along the line of contact in eastern Ukraine with a mandate to protect existing international monitors.<sup>1</sup> Although this plan was rejected by the Ukrainian President, the Ukrainian government has itself signalled its desire to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Putin UN plan seen pushing Ukraine 'civil war' narrative', 5 September 2017, as reported in BBC Monitoring Online.

have international peacekeepers implement the Minsk agreement signed in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Given apparent indicators of a willingness to consider a settlement, how can the difficulties in bringing the conflict in Donbas to a peaceful conclusion be explained?

The war in the Donbas provides an excellent example of the challenges of war termination. It will be argued that, despite the apparent cost-benefit logic for both sides of peace in eastern Ukraine, and despite both sides having advocated at various times moves to try and de-escalate the crisis, the chances of terminating the war remain remote. In making this argument, the theoretical literature on war termination will be utilised. Using this literature demonstrates that the problems of terminating the conflict in Ukraine lie in complex structural issues that are not easy to remedy. Because of this, the Donbas war is likely to persist for some time to come. In order to make this argument, this paper examines the difficulties of bringing the conflict to an end by framing the problems according to four key questions drawn from the literature on war termination. These are: is war working for the belligerents; is there a peace to be made; is peace too costly; and, can the war be stopped?<sup>3</sup>

## **The Minsk Agreement**

In theory the decision to end an armed conflict should be relatively straightforward: it should be a simple matter of determining whether the benefits of continuing to fight are outweighed by the costs. As the Prussian strategic theorist Carl von Clausewitz argues: 'Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow'.<sup>4</sup> The literature on war termination demonstrates the problems with this seemingly straightforward recommendation and instead argues strongly that wars tend to be much more difficult to stop than they are to start.<sup>5</sup> War termination theory sees the decision to end a war essentially as a political bargain between the belligerents. Each belligerent has a range of political

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<sup>2</sup> 'Ukraine president hopes Donbass peacekeepers deployed soon', Ukrainian President's website, Kyiv, 29 May 2018 as reported in BBC Monitoring Online.

<sup>3</sup> See Christopher Tuck, 'Theoretical Perspectives on the Ending of Wars', *National Institute for Defense Studies International Forum on War History: Proceedings* (March 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 92.

<sup>5</sup> William Flavin, 'Planning for Conflict termination and Post Conflict Success', *Parameters*, 33/3 (Autumn 2003), 95.

agreements that would be acceptable to them as a basis of peace – their ‘bargaining space’. Once the bargaining spaces of both sides overlap then peace can follow because there will be range of mutually acceptable political solutions available that can be used as the basis for compromise and agreement.<sup>6</sup> In practice, however, it is often difficult to create conditions in which complementary bargaining spaces emerge. As a result, ending a war is often a complex and difficult business.

On paper, it would appear that there is an established convergence in bargaining space between Russia and Ukraine. In September 2014, after months of heavy fighting in the Donbas, the first round of a diplomatic process led to the signing of the Minsk I agreement, to be followed by a second Minsk agreement in February 2015. These establish a plan for conflict termination. The Minsk II agreement laid out a roadmap for a sustainable cease-fire and the reintegration of the disputed regions back into Ukraine. The thirteen-point plan begins with a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front line, both to be monitored by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).<sup>7</sup> This is to be followed by a prisoner exchange, local elections and amnesty for fighters, as well as the safe delivery of humanitarian aid and movement towards the socio-economic integration of the separatist-held territories. Under the plan, Ukraine would implement constitutional changes to provide for decentralised control of the Donbas. All foreign armed formations would be withdrawn, and Ukraine would regain control over its borders with Russia. More recently, even the separatist groups have argued in favour of the Minsk formula. In December 2018 the head of the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR), Leonid Pasechnik, stated that ‘a bad peace is better than a good war’ and confirmed that the conflict should be settled through negotiations and the fulfilment of the Minsk Agreement.<sup>8</sup> In February 2019 both Pasechnik and the leader of the Donetsk

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<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Stanley, *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination and the Korean War* (Stanfield, CA: Stanfield University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>7</sup> For the full text of the Minsk agreement in English see, ‘Minsk agreement on Ukraine crisis: text in full’, *The Telegraph*, 12 Feb 2015.

<sup>8</sup> ‘A bad peace is better than war – Leonid Pasechnik president Lugansk republic’, *NRT 24 Russian News Channel*, 19 Dec 2018, <http://nrt24.ru/en/news/bad-peace-better-war-leonid-pasechnik-president-lugansk-republic>

People's Republic (DPR), Denis Pushilin, reconfirmed their support for the Minsk agreement and called for the intensification of negotiations with Kyiv.<sup>9</sup>

Although the agreement has stopped a return to full scale conflict, as a basis for effective conflict termination it is extremely problematic: it has become, according to the conflict resolution lexicon, more of an exercise in conflict management than a genuine basis for a termination of the conflict.<sup>10</sup> But why is this the case? In order to understand the challenges of reaching a meaningful political settlement of the crisis, a framework drawn from the war termination literature will be used to structure the analysis. This framework organises the problems of conflict termination according to four questions.

## 1. Is war working?

Rationally, wars should end when both sides have come to a similar conclusion on what its outcome will be: that one side is certain to lose; or that neither side stands any chance of winning. Once one or both sides conclude that war is no longer working to advance their interests then, rationally, there should be every incentive for them to reach a peace settlement.<sup>11</sup> As the literature on war termination illustrates, however, there are many difficulties in practice in achieving this convergence between belligerents in beliefs on the likely outcome of a war. These problems are wide-ranging. For example, one challenge in reaching a consensus on both sides on the military outcome of the war are the fallibilities inherent in the metrics used to determine whether war is working or not.<sup>12</sup> In determining how a war is going, how do we know if the gains outweigh the costs? How does one measure a 'cost' or a 'benefit'? In complex unconventional campaigns, traditional metrics such as money spent, troops deployed, relative casualty rates or ground taken are largely

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<sup>9</sup> 'Occupied Donetsk, Luhansk agree on peaceful negotiations with Kyiv on Medvedchuk's plan', *112UA*, 20 Feb 2019, <https://112.international/conflict-in-eastern-ukraine/occupied-donetsk-luhansk-agree-on-peaceful-negotiations-with-kyiv-on-medvedchuks-plan-37235.html>

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the lexicon of conflict termination and resolution, see Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, and Hugh Miall, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 3-34.

<sup>11</sup> Branislav L. Slantchev, 'The Principle of Convergence in Wartime Negotiations', *The American Political Science Review*, 97/5 (November 2003), 621; James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', *International Organization*, 49/3 (Summer 1995), 379-414.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Tuck, 'Afghanistan, Strategy, and War Termination', *Parameters* (Autumn 2012), 46.

meaningless in reaching accurate conclusions about the extent to which a belligerent genuinely is making military progress.<sup>13</sup>

In relation to the conflict in Ukraine, two issues of this kind have had a particular relevance to the problems of ending the conflict. One issue is that decisions regarding how a war is going are, from a conflict termination perspective, essentially future focused: what matters is not how things are going now; but how they will be in the future.<sup>14</sup> A belligerent that believes that a war is going badly now, but that things will improve, has every incentive to continue a war; whereas a belligerent that is doing well now, but that believes that conditions will deteriorate in the future, has an incentive to try to end a conflict sooner rather than later. But judgements about the future inevitably are speculative. War is dynamic - it is the realm of uncertainty and chance, and, as history indicates, changing circumstances can often produce outcomes that can radically upset calculations regarding the apparent balance of advantage in war. The death of a key leader; the entrance or exit of allies; domestic political upheavals, the effects of battlefield outcomes: these sorts of events can alter dramatically the assumed balance of advantage in a conflict. Because of this uncertainty, belligerents may often continue a conflict, even if immediate conditions seem bad, in the hope that 'something will turn up' that will transform their situation for the better; which, of course, it sometimes does.<sup>15</sup>

The Minsk agreement is extremely unpopular in Kyiv as it was signed under duress, when Ukrainian forces were facing a second potential military defeat, and it gives Russia almost everything that it wanted: an autonomous territory on its border with its own armed militia, administrative and justice system, guaranteed by permanent legislation and changes to Ukraine's constitution.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the agreement makes Ukraine responsible for the separatist territories while giving the Donbas enough

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Emily Mushen and Jonathan Schroden, *Are We Winning? A Brief History of Military Operations Assessment*, CNA Occasional Paper (September 2014); Ben Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessments and Metrics in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 55; Gordon A. Craig and Alexander L. George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 234.

<sup>15</sup> John D. Orme, *The Paradox of Peace: Leaders, Decisions, and Conflict Resolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 12.

<sup>16</sup> 'Ukraine: Military Deadlock, Political Crisis', *Crisis Group Europe Briefing* No.85, Kyiv/Brussels, 19 December 2016.

autonomy to challenge constantly the Ukrainian state.<sup>17</sup> Ukraine's military position has, however, improved since the Minsk agreement was signed, creating incentives to continue the war in the hope that this improvement will lead to the possibility of future commensurate improvements in Ukraine's bargaining position. In the early stages of the Anti-Terrorist Operation, the Ukrainian military was struggling to field an effective military able to defeat the separatists. In 2015 Kyiv's military objectives were less about victory or restoring control of the east than they were about holding ground and frustrating Russian advances.<sup>18</sup> However, greater mobilisation, aid from Ukrainian society, military support from volunteer battalions and active measures taken by the government increased the combat effectiveness and readiness of Ukraine's Armed Forces.<sup>19</sup> By 2017, Ukrainian forces were able to advance and take back territory in the east, after claims by the Ukrainians that their armed forces had been provoked by separatists attempting to seize government positions north of Donetsk.<sup>20</sup> As a result, Ukrainian forces solidified their defences and moved forward heavy weaponry including battle tanks.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, other dynamic factors reinforce the possibility for Ukraine that the passage of time might improve its relative bargaining positioning. For example, notwithstanding uncertainties over the US policy towards Russia (discussed later in this article) in general NATO has become progressively more willing to confront the Putin regime. This has been reflected in an increased NATO presence in the Black Sea, and the building of closer relations with Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> The latter has included a Comprehensive Assistance Package in 2016 providing NATO help in such things as training, logistics support, and cyber defence.<sup>23</sup> Whilst Ukraine cannot win an outright military victory in Donbas, the improvement in its military capabilities, and the possibility in the future of further help from NATO, holds out the opportunity of

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<sup>17</sup> 'Russia reports on Ukraine conflict settlement meeting', *Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website* in English, Moscow, 28 July 2018, as reported in BBC Monitoring Online.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, 'A stalemate Ukraine can win', *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 3 April 2015

<sup>19</sup> 'Army chief lauds 'progress' of Ukrainian military', *Narodna Armiya*, Kiev, 1 December 2016 as reported in BBC Monitoring Online; also see Deborah Sanders, 'The War We Want: The War We Get', in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Volume 30, 2017 – Issue 1, 30-49.

<sup>20</sup> Roman Olearchyk, 'Fighting escalates in eastern Ukraine' *Financial Times*, 30 January 2017

<sup>21</sup> Isaac Webb, 'Kiev is fueling the war in eastern Ukraine, too', *Foreign Policy Dispatch*, 6 Feb 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski, 'US and NATO step up presence in increasingly tense Black Sea region', | EURACTIV.com, 6 March 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/us-and-nato-step-up-presence-in-increasingly-tense-black-sea-region/>

<sup>23</sup> 'Relations with Ukraine', NATO, 14 June 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_37750.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37750.htm)

achieving future gains that might strengthen its position in negotiations. In addition, while Moscow remains Kyiv's largest trading partner and can impose damaging costs on the Ukrainian economy via sanctions this dependency is gradually changing.<sup>24</sup> Ukraine exported products worth a total of \$20.1 billion to the European Union in 2018 with total exports increasing by 15 percent, or by \$2.5 billion compared to 2017.<sup>25</sup> There are, therefore, from a Ukrainian perspective, reasons to hope that continuing the conflict will reduce its economic dependence on Russia, and result in a revised political settlement that might more accurately reflect its improved military and security position.

A second important issue highlighted by the 'is war working' question, is that of cost limitation. In assessing the costs and benefits of continuing to fight, none of the belligerents face an existential threat – thus, the costs of continuing the war are capped. Neither Ukraine nor Russia, realistically, seek the elimination of the other. For Ukraine, of course, the elimination of Russia is simply not an achievable goal given the disparities in power between the two. But Russia itself does not seek the destruction of the Ukrainian state. The root cause of the conflict is Moscow's unwillingness to recognise Ukraine as a distinct nation. For Russia, both Ukrainians and Belarussians are branches of a single Russian nation and their statehood cannot exist outside of Russia's 'zone of privileged interests'.<sup>26</sup> In essence, Russia does not seek the total military defeat of Ukraine: it wants instead to destabilise Ukraine and influence and shape its foreign policy – in particular its European orientation. Russia has sought to prevent Ukraine leaving its sphere of influence and joining the EU or NATO. Russia has used a variety of means to support the secessionist movement in the east of Ukraine as leverage to force Ukraine into accepting a federal solution to the conflict, a solution that would neutralise the government's ability to strategically reorient Ukraine in a western direction.<sup>27</sup> In an interview, the Deputy Head of the Ukrainian Presidential administration, Kostiantyn Yeliseyev, outlined what he thought

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<sup>24</sup> Viktor Suslov, 'Sanctions announced: How will Russia hit Ukrainian economy?', UNIAN 23 October 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Denys Krasnikov, 'Ukraine ramps up trade with EU, exports now worth \$20 billion', *Kyiv Post*, 19 Feb 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Taras Kuzio, *Putin's war against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime*, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva, Jenny Oberholtzer, 'Lessons from Russia's operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine', RAND Corporation, 2017, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1400/RR1498/RAND\\_RR1498.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1400/RR1498/RAND_RR1498.pdf)



were Moscow's key goals in Donbas. These include the ability to control escalation and to ensure federalisation in Ukraine 'in order to divide and eventually ruin our country'.<sup>28</sup> Thus for both sides, an important consideration in the cost-benefit analysis of war is that there are clear limits to the costs that each of the key actors can impose on one another, a condition that reduces the prospects for peace.

Of course, the actors that could theoretically be eliminated are the Donbas separatists. However, their costs in continuing the war ultimately are limited by Russian support. Whether or not this conflict is a civil war or interstate war has a profound effect on the prospects for successful conflict termination. Kuzio and D'Anieri point out that those who blame the West for the conflict in the east see it as a civil war whereas those who blame it on Russia see it as an interstate war.<sup>29</sup> While recognising that many conflicts involve both interstate and civil components, they conclude that the conflict in the east is 'more fundamentally driven by Russia than by internal Ukrainian forces and has lasted as long as it has and has produced the level of casualties it has, largely because of the forces and supplies contributed by Russia.'<sup>30</sup> Russian support to the separatists, in essence its proxy forces, is clearly a vital element in sustaining this conflict.

Russian aid to the separatists is both indirect and direct. Indirectly, Russia has focused on building up the capabilities of the separatist forces. Moscow's two goals for the separatists are to force Kyiv to negotiate with them directly and to build up the separatist's military capability.<sup>31</sup> Enhancing their operational effectiveness, Russia has transformed the separatist's army corps into two 'operational tactical command units' able to form a network of combat teams which are mobile and interoperable along the frontline. It has also significantly enhanced their military hardware. For example, Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine now have at least 390 main

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<sup>28</sup> 'Poroshenko's office names Russia goals in Donbas', *UNIAN*, 22 November 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Tara Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri, 'Annexation and Hybrid Warfare in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine', *E-International Relations*, 25 June 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/06/25/annexation-and-hybrid-warfare-in-crimea-and-eastern-ukraine/>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Andrew S. Bowen, 'Coercive diplomacy and the Donbas: Explaining Russian Strategy in Eastern Ukraine', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 21 December 2017.

battle tanks, and 800 infantry fighting vehicles.<sup>32</sup> More directly, Russia has committed its own forces to the fight when required as at the battle of Ilovaisk in August 2014, and at Debaltseve in early 2015.<sup>33</sup> This means that Russia's direct military involvement in this conflict limits the potential costs of the war to the separatists, since Russia will not allow them to be defeated, while at the same time holding out the possibility of further aid that might improve in the future the separatist's bargaining position. Russian support for the separatists also cushions them from the economic costs of the war. Estimates suggest that Russia spends over \$1bn a year on pensions, social benefits and salaries to officials and separatist forces and even more on the military.<sup>34</sup> While these costs are substantial, it is clear that Russia will continue to bear them given that the Donbas is an important part of securing its interests in the 'near abroad'.

Overall, therefore, war termination is less likely because Russia, Ukraine and the Russian-backed separatists are in a position in which the costs of the conflict can be limited, and in which improvements in their future military situation are possible. Under such circumstances, on the question of whether war is working or not the chances of a convergence is unlikely in the near future.

## **2. Is there a peace to be made?**

Following on from the difficulties created by the need for convergence on the outcome of a war, further difficulties are posed by the question of whether both sides can conceive of an acceptable political solution of some kind. Creating a common bargaining space presupposes that both sides can envisage, even in general terms, a political agreement that would be acceptable to them both. These agreements need to be objectively realisable (that is, they need to be possible to deliver), and

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<sup>32</sup> Will Ponomarenko, 'Russia molds proxy forces in Donbas into advanced army', *Kyiv Post*, 30 March 2017, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/russia-molds-proxy-forces-donbas-advanced-army.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Massacre of Ilovaisk Led to Massive Ukrainian Defeat, *Kyiv Post*, 21 August 2015; Brian Drohan and Andy Forney, 'The lessons of Debaltseve: Armoured vehicles still matter, but they need to be mobile, lethal and survivable', *Foreign Policy*, 19 March 2015; 'Casualties from Debaltseve cauldron: 136 dead, 331 injured', Ukrainian Defense Ministry *Interfax-Ukraine*, 4 February 2016.

<sup>34</sup> 'Can Peacekeepers break the deadlock in Ukraine', *International Crisis Group*, Europe Report No.246, 15 December 2017.

there also needs to be sufficient elements of compatibility between them that they can act on as a serious basis for negotiation.<sup>35</sup> There are many obstacles that can obstruct the emergence of such conditions. For example, in civil wars it is inherently more difficult to conceive of compromise solutions because, unless one partitions a country, there can only be in the end one government.<sup>36</sup> In relation to the Ukraine conflict, there are a number of difficult problems that can be seen in the creation of compatible visions of an acceptable political settlement.

One recurrent difficulty in conflicts is the extent to which they become 'value-led'. Difficulties in both sides conceiving of a legitimate political settlement increase according to the degree to which an armed conflict is value-based as opposed to issue-based.<sup>37</sup> Issue-based conflicts are often associated with such tangibles as resources or territory. Value-based conflicts, on the other hand, tend to embody at their core such intangibles as political ideologies or deeply-held historical animosities. They are conflicts that are often viewed by the protagonists as existential in nature, with core interests at stake. Value-based conflicts tend to be more difficult to resolve because in such conflicts belligerents are more willing to absorb the costs of war and less willing to compromise on goals. Value-based conflicts often tend to exhibit the characteristics of more total kinds of war, including a greater willingness to bear the costs of conflict, and a tendency to see the outcomes in zero-sum terms.<sup>38</sup> Conflicts may begin as predominantly issue-based contests, but, over time, thanks to such things as the growing sacrifices made by a society to fight the war and/or the impact of propaganda and political rhetoric, they often take on an increasingly value-led complexion.

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<sup>35</sup> H. E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 35; Bruce B. G. Clarke, 'Conflict Termination: A Rational Model', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 16/1 (1993), 30; Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), 13; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and David Lalman, *War and Reason: Domestic and International Imperatives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>36</sup> Roy Licklider, 'How Civil Wars End: Questions and Methods' in Roy Licklider (ed), *Stopping the Killing: How Civil Wars End* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1993), 10.

<sup>37</sup> Chris Tuck, 'Theoretical Perspectives on the Ending of Wars', 115.

<sup>38</sup> Paul R. Pillar, *Negotiating Peace: War Termination as a Bargaining Process* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 169-172; Adrian Guelke, 'Negotiations and Peace Processes' in John Darby and Roger Mac Ginty, *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Peace Processes and Post-War Reconstruction*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 67-68; Chaim Kaufmann, 'Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars', *International Security*, 20/4 (Spring 1996), 136-175.

The difficulty this creates is that, whilst Russia and its proxies might be willing to agree to a Minsk-type settlement, this settlement now has much less support in Ukraine itself. For many in Ukraine, the conflict essentially is an undeclared Russian war against Ukraine, and the Minsk agreement is not a genuine peace settlement but an attempt instead by Russia to undermine Ukraine in the long-term. The high costs of conscription, the significant loss of service personnel and the need to increase society's motivation by deliberately enhancing the value-based aspects of the conflict through demonising the enemy have all made this a value-based conflict for the Ukrainian government and society. In Ukraine, the government's military campaign in the east united people of all ages in a new-found patriotic fervour. Army ads dominated TV stations and war heroes were put at the top of every party's list for parliamentary election in October 2014.<sup>39</sup> The conflict in the east unleashed a wave of nationalist emotion that surged across Ukraine, manifested in the thousands of Ukrainians that took up arms in the spring of 2014. These formed volunteer battalions that bolstered the country's defences, and also provided an army of civilian volunteers who provided improvised logistical support in the form of everything from food and uniforms to ammunition.<sup>40</sup> Mykhailo Mishchenko of the Razumkov Center has also pointed out that public opinion polls consistently show that the Russian invasion has fostered Ukrainian unity and fuelled patriotism throughout the country.<sup>41</sup> This has also been associated with the growth of enemy images of Russia. By mid-2014 positive views in Ukraine of Russia had fallen considerably and 'for the majority of [Ukrainian] citizens, Russia has turned into an enemy.'<sup>42</sup> By 2015 a poll revealed that a plurality of Ukrainians blamed Russia more than any other group for the ongoing conflict in the east.<sup>43</sup> Suggesting a hardening of attitudes amongst younger Ukrainians, a recent survey of 14-28 year old citizens

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<sup>39</sup> Laura Mills, 'Ukraine wary of fragile peace as patriotism in the country surges', *Military Times*, October 2, 2014, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2014/10/02/ukraine-wary-of-fragile-peace-as-patriotism-in-the-country-surges/>.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Dickinson, 'Ukrainian patriotism has halted Putin's ill-conceived invasion', *Newsweek*, 7 March 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Conflict with Russia triggers surge of patriotism in Ukraine', *The Associated Press*, March 30 2014, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/conflict-with-russia-triggers-surge-of-patriotism-in-ukraine-1.1752555>.

<sup>42</sup> Taras Kuzio, 'What Do Russians Think of Ukrainians, and Vice Versa?', *Atlantic Council*, 19 June 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/what-do-russians-think-of-ukrainians-and-vice-versa>

<sup>43</sup> Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes and Jacob Poushter, 'Ukrainian Public Opinion: Dissatisfied with Current Conditions, Looking for an End to the Crisis', *Pew Research Centre*, 10 June 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/10/3-ukrainian-public-opinion-dissatisfied-with-current-conditions-looking-for-an-end-to-the-crisis/>.

revealed that more than 60 percent thought that Ukraine and Russia were at war; that Russia was responsible for the escalation of the war; and that 56 per cent believed that the conflict with Russia can only be settled if Russia returns Crimea and withdraws military forces from Donbas.<sup>44</sup>

These enemy images are mirrored in Russia, with the Ukrainian government being labelled routinely as a fascist regime.<sup>45</sup> For example, covering the Euromaidan protests, Russian mainstream media featured images of nationalist militias storming the parliament with Molotov cocktails as part of a 'Western-backed junta'.<sup>46</sup> In early 2014 after the collapse of the Yanukovych government, the Russian media typically referred to Ukraine's interim government as a fascist junta.<sup>47</sup> Using emotive imagery from the Second World War, in December 2018 the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, referred to Ukraine as a state 'with a Nazi regime'. A few days later a Kremlin Spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov also claimed that, in light of the ongoing conflict over the Russian seizure of Ukrainian service personnel and ships off Crimea, 'certain manifestations of neo-Nazism are playing out in Ukraine'.<sup>48</sup> Taking Kosovo as a precedent, the Russians have also portrayed the conflict as an ethnic conflict, in which Russian-speaking Ukrainians are struggling for greater autonomy from the Ukrainian nationalists in Kyiv. President Putin claimed that he reserved the right to protect Russians in Ukraine and that his concern was the 'rampage of reactionary forces, nationalist and anti-Semitic forces going on in certain parts of Ukraine, including Kiev'.<sup>49</sup>

These antipathies influence both protagonists' assessments of the desirability of the Minsk agreement. Unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, Moscow has consistently stopped short of recognising the two Donbas people's republics as

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<sup>44</sup> 'What do Ukrainian Youth Think about Russian Aggression in Ukraine?', *New Europe Center* Jan 20, 2018, [https://medium.com/@NEC\\_Ukraine/what-do-ukrainian-youth-think-about-russian-aggression-in-ukraine-7d913aad967](https://medium.com/@NEC_Ukraine/what-do-ukrainian-youth-think-about-russian-aggression-in-ukraine-7d913aad967).

<sup>45</sup> Olga Onuch, 'Brothers Grimm or Brothers Karamazov: The myth and the reality of how Russians and Ukrainians view the other', in Agnieszka Pikulichka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, Manchester University Press, 2015, 37-58.

<sup>46</sup> 'Informational Conflict: Ukraine-Russia Relations 2014-2015', *MITRE Corporation*, 20 July 2018, [https://tac.nist.gov/2018/SM-KBP/guidelines/Ukraine-Russia-Relations-Scenario-Document\\_2018-07-20\\_v1.2.pdf](https://tac.nist.gov/2018/SM-KBP/guidelines/Ukraine-Russia-Relations-Scenario-Document_2018-07-20_v1.2.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Lessons from Russia's operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, 13

<sup>48</sup> 'Russia won't go to war with 'Nazi' Ukraine, Lavrov Says', *The Moscow Times*, 18 December 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Kathy Lally and Will England, 'Putin Says he reserves right to protect Russians in Ukraine' *The Washington Post*, March 4 2014.

independent states. Russia has nevertheless been trying from a Ukrainian perspective to reduce its own responsibility for the conflict while increasing the political and military status of the republics, in order to undermine Ukraine's territorial integrity.<sup>50</sup> In order to gradually destabilize Ukraine, Russia has continued to demand that Ukraine treats Russia's proxy forces as parties to the conflict in order to raise their status to that of legitimate state actors and to downplay its involvement in the conflict. The holding of leadership and council elections in the rebel-held parts of Donbas in November 2018 was widely seen as an attempt by Moscow to demonstrate that it does not control the occupied territories in the Donbas.<sup>51</sup> In a strongly worded tweet, Kurt Volker accused Russia of attempting to institutionalise the status quo through sham "elections," and of blocking diplomatic progress on the Minsk Agreement.<sup>52</sup> The Russian government has also pursued other tactics to legitimise its proxy forces including recognising passports, attempting to establish embassies for the separatists in Europe, and allowing separatists to nationalise Ukrainian industries on their territory.<sup>53</sup> The republics have drawn closer economically to Russia with both now using the rouble as their currency and Russia has moved to take control of economic assets in the two areas.<sup>54</sup> In an interview after his recent election as leader of the DPR, Denis Pushilin stated that the republic would continue to pursue closer cultural, social and economic ties with the Russian Federation.<sup>55</sup>

In addition, the ambiguous nature of the Minsk agreement has resulted in major differences of opinion over the phrasing and emphasis of key aspects of the agreement. For instance, while Moscow has insisted on political agreements between the separatists and Kyiv first, Kyiv has refused to deal with them and insists on holding elections before talks can be held and agreements reached. The two sides have also failed to implement a ceasefire - the precursor necessary to begin

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<sup>50</sup> Balazs Jarabik and Andras Racz, 'Donbas diplomacy: Ukraine bides its time', *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, 16 March 2016.

<sup>51</sup> 'Ukraine website views rebel polls, sums up reactions', Glavred website, Kyiv, 12 November 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Kurt Volker, Tweet, 12 November 2018, <https://twitter.com/SpecRepUkraine/status/1061605713615699969>.

<sup>53</sup> Franklin Holcomb, 'The Kremlin's Irregular Army: Ukrainian separatist Order of Battle', Russia and Ukraine security report 3, *Institute for the Study of War*, September 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Steven Pifer, 'Deepening divisions in Donbas', *Brookings blog*, 2 May 2017.

<sup>55</sup> David Pratt, 'Ukraine: Hellish war hidden in plain sight', *The Herald*, 2 December 2018, <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/17270822.ukraine-hellish-war-hidden-in-plain-sight/>

the Minsk process.<sup>56</sup> An additional problem is that Russia is not mentioned in the Minsk agreement as a party required to comply with any of the points.<sup>57</sup> Instead the Minsk agreement formalises the pretence that Russia is an interested party rather than a party to the conflict.

Compounding these problems is that, in value-led conflicts, trust between the belligerents is likely to be in short supply. Even where an adversary does offer a peace settlement, it may still be rejected because the other does not believe that the offer is being made in good faith: that the other side intends to break the agreement in ways that will advantage it; or that the offer is not a serious offer but is instead a sop to domestic or international opinion; or is a way of testing the enemy's resolve. In these circumstances, peace may require acceptable mediators and/or guarantors acceptable to both sides.<sup>58</sup>

In many ways there are no acceptable and effective guarantors of a peace settlement in eastern Ukraine. Being the weaker state, Ukraine faces a problem of credible commitment that would need to be overcome in any moves towards conflict termination. The Ukrainians would have no confidence that the UN peacekeeping plan put forward by Moscow is genuine and not an attempt to improve Moscow's international reputation by seeming to engineer a sub-optimal solution that leaves Ukraine considerably worse off when sanctions are lifted by the international community. This puts a premium on the involvement of external guarantors for any peace settlement. For this reason, continued US support for Ukraine and sanctions are clearly central to any successful conflict termination in the Donbas. Without the ongoing threat of both US and European sanctions it is unlikely that Russia would have made its UN announcement and even less likely in the long term that Russia will force its proxies to implement the Minsk agreement. The European Council has noted that 'the duration of the restrictive measures against the Russian Federation,

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<sup>56</sup> 'Russia reports on Ukraine conflict settlement meeting', *Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website* in English, Moscow, 28 July 2018, as reported in BBC Monitoring Online.

<sup>57</sup> Tatyana Ivzhenko, 'There is now a new Donbass settlement plan: Kiev will seek the commitment to the area of combat operation of UN Blue Helmets', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 14 February 2017, as reported in BBC Monitoring Online.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Feargal Cochrane, *Ending Wars* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 39-69.

adopted on 31 July 2014 and enhanced on 8 September 2014 should be clearly linked to the complete implementation of the Minsk agreements.’<sup>59</sup>

The policies of the US, and of other relevant external actors, are, however, equivocal. It is clear that while sanctions are an important conflict termination tool there is evidence that there is growing opposition by some European states to the EU continuing to apply sanctions against Russia.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, US policy towards the conflict has been contradictory. The appointment of a special US envoy to Ukraine, the former US ambassador to NATO, Kurt Volker, has gone some way towards alleviating an element of Ukraine’s legitimate concerns about the commitment of the Trump Administration to Ukraine’s independence and territorial integrity.<sup>61</sup> Ambassador Volker visited the frontline in Donbas, including Avdiyivka in July 2017 and claimed that Ukraine is locked in a ‘hot war’ whose origins he blamed firmly on Russia.<sup>62</sup> Ukraine’s active lobbying in Washington has clearly paid off with the Trump Administration adopting a supportive policy towards Ukraine and a much more robust policy towards Russia reflected in such things as the provision of lethal defensive weapons and security funding.<sup>63</sup> However as a potential presidential candidate Donald Trump had commented that the war in Ukraine ‘is really a problem that affects Europe a lot more than it affects us’ and he had also suggested that he might recognise Crimea as part of Russia.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, these uncertainties may actually on occasion have worsened the fighting. In light of fears in Kyiv that the newly elected President Trump would seek to reboot relations with Russia and could drop sanctions against Moscow, fighting in the breakaway eastern regions of Ukraine escalated in the early months of his presidency. While the Ukrainians were quick to offer a military explanation for the considerable increase in violence in the east the

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<sup>59</sup> European Council, ‘European Council Conclusions on external relations (19 March 2015)’, Press Release 134/15, 19 March 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/03/19/conclusions-russia-ukraine-european-council-march-2015/>

<sup>60</sup> ‘Russian envoy detects softening of EU sanctions attitude’, *Kommersant Website*, Moscow, 26 July 2018 as reported in BBC Monitoring Online.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Malley, ‘Ukraine is ground zero for the crisis between Russia and the West’, *The Atlantic*, 16 July 2018.

<sup>62</sup> ‘2017: US-Ukraine relations: Concerns and action’, *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 19 January 2018, <http://www.ukrweekly.com/uwwp/2017-u-s-ukraine-relations-concerns-and-action/>

<sup>63</sup> Josh Rogin, ‘Trump Administration approves lethal arms sales to Ukraine’, *The Washington Post*, 20 December 2017; ‘US announces \$200 million in new security aid to Ukraine’, *RFE/RL*, 20 July 2018.

<sup>64</sup> ‘2017: US-Ukraine relations: Concerns and action’, *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 19 January 2018.



real reasons were clearly political.<sup>65</sup> In a video address President Poroshenko used the escalation to remind President Trump of the political costs of US-Russian rapprochement when he stated that the ‘shelling is massive. Who would dare talk about lifting the sanctions in such circumstances?’.<sup>66</sup>

Overall, then, the problems facing attempts to terminate the conflict in Ukraine also relate to the ways in which the war has taken on important value-led dimensions. Both sides have engaged in demonising the other, and neither trusts the other. The stoking on both sides of nationalism and patriotism have raised the willingness of the protagonists to accept the costs of war; they have undermined, on the Ukrainian side, the legitimacy of the Minsk process; and they have created strong suspicions regarding the willingness of the other side to implement fairly any peace deal that it signed.

### **3. Is peace too costly?**

Even if the belligerents think that a war is not working in their interests and that there exists a basis for a political settlement, there remain additional challenges that must be overcome before a conflict can be ended. Peace has costs, especially where a belligerent has failed to achieve all of its objectives, and these costs are not distributed equally. For a party to the conflict, peace may have a wide range of political, economic, and psychological consequences. For example, the leaders most associated with the decision to go to war in the first place may risk serious consequences if they accept a settlement that is perceived domestically as reflecting a defeat or an unnecessary compromise.<sup>67</sup> The political (and sometimes physical) costs of such a decision, such as removal from office, legal sanctions, or even death, may encourage the leadership to view accepting these costs, and therefore a peace settlement, only as a last resort. For this reason, one feature of conflict termination is that it is often associated with a change of leadership on at least one side.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Roman Olearchyk, ‘Fighting escalates in eastern Ukraine’, *Financial Times* 30 January 2017

<sup>66</sup> Isaac Webb, ‘Kiev is fuelling the war in Eastern Ukraine, Too’, *Foreign Policy*, 6 Feb 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Sarah Croco, *Peace at What Price: Domestic Politics, Settlement Costs and War Termination* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008), 6-7; David Keen, *Endless War? Hidden Functions of the War on Terror* (London: Pluto Press, 2006); Cochrane, *Ending Wars*, 104-111.

<sup>68</sup> Mitchell, *The Structure of International Conflict*, 184.

Externally, the costs of peace can include damage to an actor's international credibility and prestige; the weakening of relationships with allies; and the encouragement of other actual or potential adversaries who may interpret the decision to accept peace as a sign of weakness.<sup>69</sup> One of the particular difficulties with this cost issue is that it is often circular – the longer the leadership puts off peace, the higher the costs of peace are likely to be, and the more unpalatable peace therefore becomes.<sup>70</sup>

The internal costs problem was particularly evident for the former Ukrainian leader, Petro Poroshenko, who was both involved in the decision to use force against the separatists and who had also publicly staked his reputation on pushing back the separatist forces in the east.<sup>71</sup> Poroshenko was in many ways hostage to his own policy. The Minsk Agreements are based on the plan proposed and signed by Poroshenko, so his political survival and that of his party was linked to the successful ending of this conflict. Indicative of this link, as the conflict dragged on, public approval ratings for President Poroshenko plummeted. In June 2018 Poroshenko's disapproval ratings had reached 80%, which in terms of effective conflict termination translated into a lack of political manoeuvrability, an unwillingness to accept political compromises in negotiations with Russia, and the inability to sell a deal to the electorate.<sup>72</sup>

The new Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, elected in a landslide victory in April 2019 will also face domestic challenges to effective conflict resolution. Polls have shown that only 9.2% of the Ukrainian population view the key Minsk Agreements favourably and there is little public appetite for any talk of compromise.<sup>73</sup> Public opposition to the Minsk Agreement was seen in Kyiv when attempts by the Ukrainian parliament in August 2015 to debate changing the constitution to meet the requirements to provide special status for the separatist republics led to riots and the

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<sup>69</sup> Barbara F. Walter, *Reputation and Civil War: Why Separatist Conflicts are so Violent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10-15.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Codner, *The Implications of War Termination Considerations for the Operational Commander* (Newport, RI: US Naval War College, March 1991), 4.

<sup>71</sup> 'Ukraine President regrets 2014 vow to swiftly end war in the east', *Interfax News Agency*, Kiev, in Russian, 23 August 2018 as reported in BBC Monitoring Online.

<sup>72</sup> 'Public opinion survey of resident of Ukraine' *Center for insight in Survey Research*, May 26-June 10, 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Webb, 'Kiev is fuelling the war in Eastern Ukraine, Too',

death of three National Guardsmen. Further highlighting the lack of public appetite for compromise, Viktor Pinchuk, an influential Ukrainian oligarch, was forced to back down in December 2016 when he was alleged to have claimed in an Op-Ed piece in the Wall Street Journal that Ukraine should be prepared to make painful compromises for peace with the separatists including not letting Crimea get in the way and abandoning Ukraine's European aspirations.<sup>74</sup> In addition, Nadiya Savchenko, a Ukrainian pilot held in prison in Russia, was denounced as a traitor by hard liners a few months after her release for suggesting that the only peaceful resolution to the conflict in the east was to put Crimea on the back burner.<sup>75</sup> There is increasing evidence of a slide towards more hawkish policies towards the east amongst the Ukrainian political elite. Oleksandr Turchynov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council was the first to advocate a full economic blockade of the Donbas to stop the flow of illegal goods into the separatist regions.<sup>76</sup> This more hawkish position towards the east has also been seen amongst more liberal Ukrainian politicians in Kyiv who increasingly support the isolation of the self-proclaimed republics. Liberal reformers, like parliamentarian Mustaf Nayem, an instigator of the Maidan protests, have warned against Ukraine formalising its Minsk obligations under international law.<sup>77</sup> Civil military officials in Kyiv-controlled areas along the line of contact as well as young internally displaced people with family members across the line have also called on the government to isolate the republics.<sup>78</sup> For Ukraine, isolation of the republics would mean avoiding having to pay for the enormous investments necessary to fix the devastated region and dealing with the political consequences of integrating several million anti-Western voters who would vote against Ukraine's pro-Western reforms.<sup>79</sup> This move towards more hawkish positions has meant that there is no coherent party of peace in Ukraine, as domestically this position is unsustainable.<sup>80</sup> In many ways advocating peace has become an electoral problem in Ukraine.

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<sup>74</sup> For a reply to his critics see 'Ukrainian tycoon clarifies his call for compromise with Russia', *Ukrayinska Pravda website*, Kyiv, 13 January 2017 as reported in BBC Monitoring Online.

<sup>75</sup> David L. Stern, 'She was Ukraine's 'Joan of Arc'. Now she's accused of plotting a coup in Kiev', *The Washington Post*, March 28 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Webb, 'Kiev is Fueling the war in eastern Ukraine, too'.

<sup>77</sup> 'Can Peacekeepers break the deadlock in Ukraine?' *Crisis Group Europe Report* no.246, 15 December 2017.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, 'Kiev Should Give Up on the Donbass', *Foreign Policy*, 2 Feb 2017.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

Ukraine's increasingly intransigent position also increases the potential costs of peace for the separatist governments. In light of growing public animosity towards Russia, particularly amongst residents living in the west of Ukraine, and a surge in patriotism, conflict termination by the Ukrainian government or support by individual politicians for the Minsk agreement, risks being portrayed as deeply unpatriotic and even treasonable.<sup>81</sup> Indicative of this is the draft law on 'collaborators' which potentially applies this term to rank and file civil servants in the separatist administration. Thus, the Ukrainian political elites will struggle politically to reach the necessary compromises to achieve conflict termination, and this makes it more likely that Ukrainians will demand from a peace settlement that punitive actions be taken against key separatist leaders.<sup>82</sup>

These cost problems also have relevance for President Putin. On the one hand, there are certainly advantages to be obtained for Putin by a successful resolution of the Ukraine conflict. In 2018 there has been evidence to suggest that the cycles of violence following the breakdown of cease fires in the east have been declining suggesting that international events, particularly the international backlash in response to the Russian nerve agent attack in Salisbury, could be creating conditions for conflict termination. In addition, President Putin is acutely aware of the high costs of economic sanctions and low oil prices on the Russian economy and understands that Moscow needs 'normal relations with the west', which can only be achieved with successful conflict resolution in the east.<sup>83</sup> Domestically Putin is also finding it hard to cover up the high body count coming out of the Donbas as both international and domestic Russia media have been digging up information on casualties.<sup>84</sup>

However, President Putin is also not immune from the costs of alienating key constituencies by accepting a peace deal that fails to meet domestic Russian

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<sup>81</sup> Julie Ray and Neli Esipova, 'Ukrainians, Russians more polarized on future of relations', *Gallup*, 23 February 2018.

<sup>82</sup> Katherine Quinn-Judge, 'To reunite Ukraine, Kyiv must overcome its own prejudices', *International Crisis Group*, 20 March 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Mark Mackinnon, 'As the Russian economy and Putin's popularity tumble, the war drums grow louder and critics take cover', *The Globe and Mail*, 16 December 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Bociurkiw, 'Is Russia getting ready to exit the Donbas?', *Atlantic Council*, 2 April 2018.

expectations. That public opinion does matter in Russia is evident in the opposition to the government's policy of raising the state retirement age: this was regarded as a move necessary economically to meet some of the challenges of Russia's aging population. In September 2018, Vladimir Putin's ruling party lost three regional governorships as anger at reforms to Russia's pension system dented its popularity and appeared to loosen the Kremlin's iron grip on the ballot box.<sup>85</sup> Thus, despite creating a model of state-centric governance the regime is, to some extent, still ultimately affected by public opinion.

In relation to terminating the conflict in Ukraine, Putin faces a common challenge that afflicts many leaders in ending wars short of absolute victory. This problem is caused by the ways in which governments, in order to mobilise domestic opinion behind a war, tend to paint a conflict in essentialist terms: a struggle between the forces of good and bad; a conflict in which the costs of defeat and the benefits of success would both be high.<sup>86</sup> The problem for the Putin regime in relation to Ukraine is the extent to which it has been successful in selling a particular narrative of the conflict to its own domestic constituencies. Russia's narrative, which justifies the annexation of Crimea by claims of protecting the Russian-speakers, has used the same explanation as a propaganda tool for fuelling the conflict in the east.<sup>87</sup> The Russian perspective on the Euromaidan protests argues that it took place because of a coup d'état that removed a democratically-elected president from power as a result of extremist neo-Nazi and Western involvement. Moscow has also promoted a narrative that actively denies a Russian military presence in Eastern Ukraine while at the same time also providing support to the insurgency.<sup>88</sup> The Russian state media, as well as public opinion polls, demonstrate that there is a considerable difference in how the conflict and events leading up to the conflict in the east are viewed in Russia as opposed to in Ukraine in light of Russia's information campaign. In Russia the state-run media, which for 90-95% of Russians is their main source of information about Ukraine, has consistently sought to discredit the Euromaidan protests that led to the overthrow of President Yanukovich and has portrayed Ukraine as a failed and

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<sup>85</sup> Henry Foy, 'Putin's party suffers regional poll defeats over pension anger' *Financial Times*, 24 September 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Fred Ikle, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 83.

<sup>87</sup> Valeria Lazarenko, 'Conflict in Ukraine: multiplicity of narratives about the war and displacement', *European Politics and Society*, 30 November 2018.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

disintegrating state overrun by nationalist forces.<sup>89</sup> A poll conducted by the Levada Center in Moscow in 2017 showed that 80% of the Russians polled thought that the Euromaidan protests were an attempted violent coup d'état.<sup>90</sup> Public opinion polls have also shown that Russians are virtually unanimous in denying their country's responsibility for events in the east and there is a general consensus that President Putin's policies in Ukraine are a reaction to the expansion of NATO and the threat faced by the Russian-speaking population of the Donbas.<sup>91</sup> Most Russians viewed the conflict as internal, caused by locals defending themselves against the spread of Ukrainian nationalism.<sup>92</sup> The Russian public is also increasingly sceptical as to the prospects for peace in the east. A Russian public opinion poll showed that an increased number of those polled in late 2017, as opposed to polls conducted in 2015 and 2016, thought that the situation in eastern Ukraine will not improve.<sup>93</sup> Despite the limited domestic political opposition in Russia even President Putin will have to take into account the high level of public support for the strategic narrative that his regime has created over the last five years. Given that the majority of the Russian population do appear to have bought into these dominant narratives, conflict termination will require the buy in of the Russian population which might take some time.

Thus, both of the key actors in the Ukraine conflict face significant domestic political costs if they accept a peace deal that falls short of publicly articulated visions of success. In both cases, key political leaders have constructed or inherited strategic narratives surrounding the war designed to mobilise support behind their early policies. But having been successful in giving these narratives life, they cannot now be simply 'turned off': expectations have been created about the shape of victory in the Ukraine conflict that cannot be dashed without considerable costs to the legitimacy of the government.

#### **4. Can the war be stopped?**

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<sup>89</sup> Denis Volkov, 'Supporting a war that isn't: Russian public opinion and the Ukraine conflict', *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, 9 September 2015.

<sup>90</sup> 'Protests in Kiev', Press Releases, *Levada Center*, 3 April 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2017/04/03/protest-in-kiev/>.

<sup>91</sup> Volkov, 'Supporting a war that isn't: Russian public opinion and the Ukraine conflict',

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 54.

<sup>93</sup> 'Russian public opinion 2017', Annual, *Levada analytical center*, Moscow 2018.

A fourth consideration is the extent to which, even if the leadership of a belligerent accepts that peace is necessary, possible, and that they are willing to bear the costs, they can convince key 'war-oriented actors' to support them. In other words, can the leadership force through the desired political settlement? The term 'war-oriented actors' encompasses any actor, domestic or international, that has an interest in the conflict – this can be allies, political parties, influential individuals, sections of the public and the press.<sup>94</sup> Essentially, in order to stop a conflict, the leadership must be able to carry with them those constituencies upon whom they rely on to stay in power. Failing to do this may result in the leadership being coerced into continuing the war anyway, or even being removed and replaced with those opposed to peace.<sup>95</sup>

In Russia, Putin's domination of the levers of power creates advantages from a conflict termination perspective. As long as he is willing to accept the damage to his credibility, a decision by Putin to change his policy towards the war in Ukraine would likely be implemented. Russia's political system is highly state-centric, where the state is composed of the inner circles of the country's administrative, political and financial elite and everything is under the control of these elites that hold positions within the state.<sup>96</sup> In addition, the political system has been deinstitutionalised and assumed a corporatist tendency which privileges state control over society. In the current Russian parliament, the Duma, United Russia, President Putin's political party, is the largest faction with 343 of 450 seats. Political parties in the Duma, are fragmented, spanning the ideological spectrum from communists to nationalists and liberals and there is no opposition to United Russia as no one party holds a mandate large enough to challenge the party in power.<sup>97</sup> The regime has also attempted to eliminate any opposition. Just prior to the Presidential elections Amnesty

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<sup>94</sup> Robert F. Randle, *The Origins of Peace: A Study of Peacemaking and the Structure of Peace Settlements* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1973), 2-3.

<sup>95</sup> Elisabeth Stanley, *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination, and the Korean War* (Stanfield, CA: Stansfield University Press, 2009), 30-31; Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman, *War and Reason*, 8.

<sup>96</sup> Andrei Kolesnikov, 'Frozen Landscape: The Russian Political system Ahead of the 2018 Presidential elections', *Carnegie Moscow Center*, March 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Kanak Gokarn, 'Political opposition in Russia in 2018: Composition, challenges and prospects', *Observer Research Foundation*, 22 June 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/political-opposition-russia-2018-composition-challenges-prospects/>.

International accused Russia of mounting a "fierce crackdown" on political activists, systematically violating their rights through "arbitrary" arrests and detentions.<sup>98</sup> And in September last year the leading opposition politician Alexei Navalny was re-arrested immediately after being released from prison for arranging a protest earlier in the year. Given their high economic and military dependency on Russia, Moscow also has the ability to enforce its will on the separatists. Indeed, Moscow has been accused of assassinating a number of separatist commanders in the east; in essence removing first generation and publicly unacceptable rebels.<sup>99</sup> In October 2016 'Motorola' who led a battalion of Moscow backed separatists in the conflict and had emerged as one of the region's most famous warlords was assassinated in Donetsk by a remote-controlled bomb. Prior to this assassination, Yevgeny Zhilin, a separatist field commander was gunned down in a restaurant in Moscow and Pavel Dremov, a Cossack battalion commander, was assassinated by car bomb just hours after his celebrating his wedding.<sup>100</sup>

In Ukraine, on the other hand, this issue is more of a problem. Given the lack of public appetite for compromise over the conflict, most of the more serious prospective Ukrainian presidential candidates that ran in the election at the end of March 2019 adopted a robust approach to conflict termination in the east. This suggests that in Ukraine there is generally a broad consensus amongst the political elite on the prospect for and solutions to this conflict. On the one hand, with the exception of the right-wing forces in Ukraine, there is a sense that diplomacy, whether this is through direct negotiating with Russia, increasing western engagement or by setting up an international peacekeeping operation, is the best way to resolve the conflict. On the other, there is widespread rejection of a political solution that does not give Ukraine much more than is promised by Minsk. In many ways the whole of the political spectrum in Ukraine is made up of 'war orientated actors', and while the current Ukrainian election process is likely to lead to the election of a new president, policy itself is unlikely to change significantly.

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<sup>98</sup> Alan Crosby, 'Amnesty Warns Russia Is Escalating Opposition Crackdown As Election Nears', *RFE/RL*, 15 March 2018.

<sup>99</sup> Jack Losh, 'Is Russia Killing Off Eastern Ukraine's Warlords', *Foreign Affairs*, 25 October 2016.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*



Adopting perhaps the most hard-line position amongst the Presidential hopefuls, was the former Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, leader of Ukraine's Batkivshchina party. She declared that the Minsk process was an 'absolute dead end', described the rebel negotiators as puppets and stated her opposition to providing special status to the Donbas region.<sup>101</sup> Tymoshenko also ruled out an indiscriminate amnesty for those in the DPR/LPR and stated both that federalism was unacceptable and that Ukraine had to remain a unitary state in order to discourage further separatism.<sup>102</sup> The incumbent President Poroshenko also adopted a robust message during the campaign of 'army, language and faith'. The former defence minister and prospective candidate, Anatoliy Hrytsenko, promised to bring rebel held areas under Kyiv's control within five years and warned against capitulation to Russia. Warning against a military operation to win back the rebel held areas; Hrytsenko instead called for abiding by the Minsk agreement and recognised the need to secure an international peacekeeping mission to effectively resolve the conflict in the Donbas.<sup>103</sup> Yuriy Boyko, the former ally of ousted President Viktor Yanukovich and the only presidential candidate who received a favourable portrayal in the Russian state media, promised in his bid to become President to stop military action in the east and to improve relations with Russia. He has also said that he would hold direct talks with Russia and the rebels as this is 'the only path towards achieving peace and returning territories and people.'<sup>104</sup> The only candidate to advocate a much harder line in his presidential campaign was the former deputy parliament speaker, Ruslan Koshulynskyy of the Freedom party, who was a joint candidate of several far-right forces. In a tough anti-Moscow stance Koshulynskyy called for additional military, diplomacy, economic and ideological pressure on Russia.<sup>105</sup>

In his presidential bid Volodymyr Zelensky, the star of a popular comedy in Ukraine, who went on to win 73 percent of the popular vote in the second round of the Ukrainian Presidential elections, stated that he would seek a complete ceasefire in

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<sup>101</sup> Yana Lyushnevskaya, 'Explainer: Ukraine presidential hopefuls and their stance on Russia', *Insight*, 7 Feb 2019 as reported in BBC Monitoring Online.

<sup>102</sup> Anton Klinkov, 'Tymoshenko speaks out against special status of Donbass, Ukraine's federalization', *TASS News Agency*, 30 October 2018.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Valentyna Romanova, 'What will the 2019 Ukraine elections spell for the Donbas Conflict', *Italian Institute for Political Studies*, 6 Feb 2019.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

the Donbas and then have direct talks with Putin if he was elected. He also pointed out that the Minsk Agreement should be modified, and any compromise reached with Russia should be presented to the Ukrainian people for approval.<sup>106</sup> Despite early optimism that a new Ukrainian President, whose political party, Servant of the People, also won an absolute majority in the parliamentary elections in July 2019, could re-invigorate the Minsk Process, Zelensky has already faced domestic opposition to his proposals on conflict resolution which have been seen as capitulating to Russia.<sup>107</sup> At the June 2019 Trilateral Contact Group meeting, Kyiv's representatives explored a number of proposals including an agreement on a new ceasefire and more controversially the lifting of Ukraine's economic blockade on the Donbas.<sup>108</sup> However, in light of a political backlash to the idea of lifting the blockade, the newly elected President, keen to assuage his critics, pointed out that 'nobody intends to trade in the territory and sovereignty of Ukraine'.<sup>109</sup>

Despite winning a parliamentary majority the new Ukrainian President will continue to face domestic challenges to effective conflict termination. The Ukrainian pro-Russian political party *Opposition Platform — For Life* is set to become the second largest party in the new Ukrainian parliament and will continue to play a role in shaping the narrative and potential of conflict termination. The party leaders – Yuriy Boyko, Vadim Rabinovych and Viktor Medvedchuk, whose daughter's godfather is Russian President Vladimir Putin, frequently travel to Moscow, where they negotiate directly with the Kremlin without the backing of Kyiv. Adopting a very different position from the new President, Medvedchuk has stated that in order to resolve the conflict the new Ukrainian parliament must ensure amnesty for the Russia-led insurgents, offer special status to the occupied regions in Ukraine's east and it also hold special elections in these territories.<sup>110</sup> In an early sign of tension between the two political parties, the head of the Servant of the People Party, Oleksandr

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<sup>106</sup> Lyushnevskays, 'Explainer: Ukraine presidential hopefuls and their stance on Russia'.

<sup>107</sup> Anna Arutunyan, 'Is Russia Changing its Calculus in Eastern Ukraine?', 11 June 2019

<sup>108</sup> 'Kuchma in Minsk proposed to remove the blockade of Donbass', BBC News Ukraine, 5 June 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Oleksiy Sorokin, 'Kremlin-friendly Opposition Platform becomes second largest party in parliament', *Kyiv Post*, 22 July 2019.

Razumkov, criticised Medvedchuk's visit to the European Parliament claiming that the pro-Russian politician is not responsible for Ukraine's foreign policy.<sup>111</sup>

## Conclusion

Overall, then, the basic structural difficulties that commonly affect attempts to terminate armed conflicts are likely to continue to operate in the war in eastern Ukraine. It is clear that an early or easy termination of the crisis remains highly unlikely. Whilst it might be thought that a protracted stalemate would make peace easier, Ukraine is an example of a common conflict termination problem: negative duration dependence.<sup>112</sup> Essentially, the longer wars go on, often the more difficult they are to resolve because of obstacles that are reinforced by, or emerge during, the war. Neither Russia, Ukraine, nor, indeed the separatists, face existential costs in continuing the war. The conflict in the east of Ukraine is a limited war that both sides have been keen to avoid escalating. The upper ceiling set on the costs of the conflict has been accompanied by dynamic elements that make it difficult for the belligerents to agree on the likely outcome of the conflict. To put these points another way, continuing to protract the war does not hold out the prospect for any of the protagonists of immediate defeat; and it is possible that military and political circumstances might change over time, thus improving their bargaining positions. There are a range of other factors reinforcing the logic of continuing the war. Notwithstanding the Minsk process, there is no political settlement that commands consensus. Indeed, given the increasing value-led aspects of the war and the lack of trust on both sides, there is currently little overlap in the range of acceptable political compromises. At the same time, political leaders have been complicit in creating within key domestic constituencies expectations regarding what a legitimate peace should look like that are incompatible with those of their adversary. At the moment, therefore, compromise is likely to carry high political costs for the leadership of the belligerents, and it is likely to be difficult to mobilise support around such a compromise.

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<sup>111</sup> 'Opposition platform- For Life: Reaction of Razumkov Medvedchuk's visit to EP shows authorities crossed line', 112UA, 19 July 2019, <https://112.international/politics/opposition-platform--for-life-reaction-of-razumkov-on-medvedchuks-visit-to-ep-shows-authorities-crossed-line-41861.html>

<sup>112</sup> Elizabeth Stanley and John P. Sawyer, 'The Equifinality of War Termination: Multiple Paths to Ending War.' *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53 (October 2009), 668–670.

### Author details

Dr Deborah Sanders, Reader in Defence and Security Studies in the Defence Studies Department, King's College London at the UK Defence Academy.

[deborah.sanders@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:deborah.sanders@kcl.ac.uk)

Dr Christopher Tuck, Reader in Strategic Studies in the Defence Studies Department, King's College London at the UK Defence Academy

[christopher.tuck@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:christopher.tuck@kcl.ac.uk)