Protracted Conflicts in the OSCE Area: De-escalation and Prevention as Priorities in 2016

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The German Chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has declared crisis and conflict management a priority. In this context, it is necessary to take a sober look at the partially frozen, partially smoldering conflicts in the OSCE area. An important common feature of these conflicts is the fact that Russia is now increasingly instrumentalizing them for its hegemonic purposes. Decisive breakthroughs during this Chairmanship period are therefore unlikely. It is all the more important, therefore, to continue efforts to de-escalate the conflict in Ukraine, to prevent renewed escalations of other conflicts, and to maintain open lines of communication and possibilities of exchange across the conflict lines.

An “Archipelago of Hybrids”

Seen in their entirety, the protracted conflicts in the OSCE area form an archipelago of hybrid states – or “hybrids” – that are increasingly being used to secure a Russian sphere of interest. Their hybrid nature is characterized by a coexistence of autonomous and virtual state functions, the latter of which are not internationally recognized and are in part provided by third countries.

Many of the hybrids – Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria – emerged in the late 1980s with the collapse of the Soviet Union, when local conflict actors responded to the efforts of individual Soviet Republics to become independent. Although there was intervention by Russian actors, there was initially no “grand strategy.”

This changed when Russia formulated its claim to a sphere of privileged interest and established the Eurasian Union as a hegemonic counter-project to EU Association. The hybrids were now increasingly used to exert influence on the foreign policy orientation of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova. This development took on a new quality when the conflict in Ukraine was deliberately escalated in 2014 in order to annex Crimea and install new hybrids in eastern Ukraine.

1. **Nagorno-Karabakh** | In the earliest and deadliest of the late Soviet Union’s armed independence conflicts, in 1991, the enclave’s ethnic Armenian majority fought against Azerbaijan with the support of Armenia. Nagorno-Karabakh, which officially strives for independence, has since then maintained close ties with Armenia. The enclave, as well as an additional 14% of occupied Azerbaijani territory, are secured jointly. At the same time, Armenia maintains a close security partnership with Russia.

As a step toward conflict management, a 1992 OSCE conference launched the “Minsk Group,” which is co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States. The 1994 ceasefire was brokered by Russia. Since then, the conflict has been smoldering with low intensity at the contact line. However, since 2014 there has been a significant increase in the number of violent attacks.

2. **South Ossetia** | The ceasefire after the conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia in 1991 was secured by Georgian-Russian-Ossetian peacekeeping forces and an OSCE monitoring mission. In 2008, escalations along the contact line led to the five-day Georgian-Russian war, as a result of which Russia vetoed the extension of the OSCE mission, recognized the independence of South Ossetia, increased its military presence and fortified the border to Georgia. In 2015, South Ossetia intensified its ties with Russia through an alliance and integration treaty.

3. **Abkhazia** | Following Abkhazia’s independence conflict with Georgia in 1992, a Russian peacekeeping force under CIS mandate and a UN Observer Mission (UNOMIG) were created. Here too, Russia responded to the war with Georgia by vetoing UNOMIG’s mandate, officially recognizing Abkhazia, establishing a military and a naval base as well as fortifying the border to Georgia. An alliance and strategic partnership treaty in 2014 cemented the close ties with Russia.

4. **Transnistria** | During Transnistria’s struggle for independence from Moldova in 1992, the 14th Soviet (later Russian) Army, which was stationed in Transnistria, intervened in the conflict. Following a Russian-mediated ceasefire, a Moldovan-Transnistrian-Russian peacekeeping force was created. An OSCE agreement on Russian troop withdrawal by the end of 2002 was not implemented due to lack of political progress. In a “referendum” held in 2006, a clear majority of the population voted for independence and later accession to the Russian Federation. In 2014, this decision was affirmed with reference to the Crimean “referendum.” In late 2014, Russia intensified bilateral relations with Transnistria.

International conflict management takes place in a “5+2 format,” with participation by Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE, the EU and the United States (the latter two with observer status), in addition to the conflict parties.

5. **Crimea** | In late February 2014, unmarked Russian troops, some of whom were stationed at the Sevastopol Russian naval base, occupied strategic positions in Crimea and blocked access to Ukrainian bases. This enabled a coup in the Crimean parliament, followed by a referendum on independence. Despite the fact that the UN General Assembly declared the referendum void, Crimea was incorporated into the Russian Federation.

6. **Eastern Ukraine** | In spring 2014, irregular fighters with heavy weapons infiltrated eastern Ukraine from Russia to support local combatants in declaring “People’s Republics” in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. When the separatists were on the brink of suffering a defeat by Ukrainian troops and volunteer battalions, unmarked Russian units intervened to help repel them. Political actors and security forces in the “People’s Republics” receive financial, logistical and personnel support from Russia.

In March 2014, the Permanent Council of the OSCE mandated a Special Monitoring Mission (SMM); in May, a Trilateral Contact Group between Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE was established. The Minsk Protocol of September 2014 and the Minsk Package of Measures of February 2015 provide for a ceasefire and a political roadmap for conflict resolution. The OSCE was given the role of monitoring and supporting these agreements. At the same time, a Joint Control Mission of Ukrainian and Russian forces was established.
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tr>
<td>1990/1991</td>
<td>Declaration of independence. Armed conflicts with GEO.</td>
<td>Around 2,000 casualties and 120,000 refugees.</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Dagomys ceasefire agreement, monitored by a Joint Control Commission and peacekeeping force GEO-RUS-Georgia as well as an OSCE Observer Mission.</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>Nagorno-Karabakh (NKR) South Ossetia (SOS) Abkhazia (ABK) Transnistria (TMR) Crimea Eastern Ukraine</td>
<td>Separatist uprising as a reaction to Maidan in Kiev. Mass infiltration of armed fighters from RUS. Proclamation of so-called &quot;People's Republics&quot; in Donetsk and Luhansk. RUS support of separatists with equipment and deployment of unmarked troops. Staging of a threat of additional 14% of AZE territory and securing of contact line jointly with ARM.</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>RUS veto against continuation of UNOMIG.</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>Minsk Agreement and Protocol; OSCE-promoted negotiations.</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>Plans for a referendum on accession to RUS.</td>
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**Abbreviations:**
- ABK = Abkhazia
- ARM = Armenia
- AZE = Azerbaijan
- CIS = Commonwealth of Independent States
- GEO = Georgia
- MOL = Moldova
- NKR = Nagorno-Karabakh
- SOS = South Ossetia
- TMR = Transnistria
- UKR = Ukraine
- UN = United Nations
- OSCE = Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- RUS = Russia
- EU = European Union
- US = United States
- NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization

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Priorities: De-escalation and avoiding new escalations

The OSCE is currently playing a role in the management of all protracted conflicts, with the exception of Crimea: in eastern Ukraine with the Trilateral Contact Group and the Special Monitoring Mission, in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia through participating in the Geneva talks. In addition, there is the largely autonomous Minsk Group for Nagorno-Karabakh (see table).

The hybrid states concerned differ in terms of the number of casualties incurred in the respective armed conflict, their ethnic diversity/homogeneity as well as in their political and cultural affinity to Russia. One thing they have in common, however, is the increasing instrumentalization for hegemonic Russian interests. Their interlinkage with Russian institutions has been advanced to various degrees, in some cases extending as far as complete integration with those institutions. The entire archipelago of hybrids thus serves as a bargaining chip against the pro-Western orientation of their mother countries. The political message behind this is: An escalation can occur at any time, also by using hybrid means.

A lasting conflict resolution is not likely to occur unless a cooperative foreign policy paradigm reemerges in Russia. This is dependent on internal factors and on the balance of power at international level – the OSCE and the activities of the German Chairmanship constitute only one of several playing fields.

Under these circumstances, de-escalation and the avoidance of renewed escalations (i.e. secondary prevention) remain the most pressing tasks of the OSCE. In that process, it is also important to facilitate exchanges across the lines of conflict and to foster concrete improvements to the living conditions of local populations.

1. In eastern Ukraine, the fragile ceasefire needs to be further consolidated and the political measures agreed in Minsk implemented: granting special status for parts of eastern Ukraine, holding free and fair local elections according to Ukrainian law and reinstating Ukrainian sovereignty over the state border to Russia.

2. In Nagorno-Karabakh there is a growing risk of renewed escalation that has been aggravated by recent tensions between Russia and Turkey, which has also led to a bolstering of the Russian military presence in Armenia. The region is located at the neuralgic interface of key east-west and north-south axes of transport and energy, and is thus a particular focus of policies competing for spheres of interest.

3. Transnistria was for years considered to be the conflict with the most promising prospects for resolution; corresponding initiatives, however, have stalled. At present, the central question is how Transnistria will be affected by the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, and how the relatively relaxed exchange across the contact line can be maintained.

4. At the moment, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea appear to be relatively stable. But here too, unpleasant surprises are conceivable. Only recently, Russia pushed South Ossetia’s contact line further into Georgian territory.

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