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Dynamics and Prospects of the Situation in Donbass: A view from Kyiv

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Summary

With Vladimir Zelensky coming to power in Ukraine, a window of opportunities (or more exactly – a new impulse) for conflict resolution in Donbass has appeared. Zelensky is earnestly seeking a mutually acceptable solution of the Donbass problem (unlike Poroshenko who had just imitated his participation in the negotiation process for the past two and a half years of his presidency).

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The Steinmeier formula and troops withdrawal

Following the successful exchange of prisoners between Ukraine and Russia in early September that was agreed by phone negotiations between Zelensky and Putin, the major priority for President Zelensky was exactly the conflict solution in Donbass. Vladimir Zelensky bets a lot on the meeting between leaders of the Normandy format countries and on the negotiations with Moscow. This is why, despite dissatisfaction inside the country, he agreed to implement preliminary conditions for the Paris Summit: agreements realization in the three pilot regions (Staniza Luhanskaya, Zolotoye and Petrovskoye).

The concessions raised many concerns and criticism inside Ukraine. The signing of the *Steinmeier formula* consolidated different political camps. From nationalists and militant patriots to the political opponents of Zelensky (first of all, the Poroshenko party) and the representatives of the civil society who are afraid of risky and one-sided concessions by Ukraine in the process of peaceful negotiations. In early October, the opponents of the Steinmeier formula and troops withdrawal in Donbass formatted the

protest movement called *No Capitulation*. In the first half of October, the movement participants held mass protest actions, twice in Kyiv and other cities of Ukraine. Around ten thousand people took part in Kyiv. By Ukrainian standards, this is not few, but not too many. These actions did not reach the Maidan scale anyway.

The *No Capitulation* movement has a great social base. According to the survey data of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), which was held on 9-11 October, around 26 percent of the respondents supported the protests.
However, about 41 percent viewed them negatively.

> It is obvious that on the issue of the Donbass conflict resolution, there is no consensus in the Ukrainian society.

The *No Capitulation* protest movement is based on the social minority. However, this minority is significantly active. Around 25-30 percent of the Ukrainians protested against any agreements with Russia, including on Donbass, even earlier (during Poroshenko's presidency).This is a political-ideological camp of "militant patriots." About 15-20 percent of the Ukrainians are ready to support peace, including peace on the Russian conditions. Meanwhile the majority of the population (about 50-60 percent) support a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but not on any conditions. This composition has not changed significantly for the recent years.

Zelensky himself would not agree to peace by any means. He understands that this would mean the same "capitulation" (Ukrainians would perceive it that way) and lead to a domestic political crisis. The President underlined several times that he would agree neither to the "elections at gunpoint" nor to the formalization of "the special status" of the separate areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Instead, Zelensky prepares the inclusion of decentralization throughout the territory of Ukraine in the Constitution (but for the local communities, not for the regions).

The position of foreign actors, if it contradicts the President's position, as well as the mood of the majority of the Ukrainians, will not be seen as a reason for action. It was so under Poroshenko, so it will be under Zelensky. The latter demonstrated not once that he would follow anyone's orders. Moreover, if advice from foreign partners contradicts his own views and political attitudes. But Zelensky also showed that he is ready to defend his own position inside the country and implement it in practice. His information and political activity in mid-October contributed to the relative neutralization of protest moods against the Steinmeier formula. In the second half of October and early November, there were no mass protests in that regard. He also ensured that nationalists and the veterans of military operations withdrew weapons from Zolotoye. As a result,

troops withdrawal in Zolotoye, and later in Petrovskoye, took place. That showed that Zelensky controls the political and military situation in the conflict zone and throughout the country.

Dynamics of the Ukrainian domestic discourse

The political discourse in relation to the conflict is changing rather in an ad-hoc manner, depending on the topics, which are in the focus of public attention. For example, in September and early October the discussion on the Steinmeier formula and troops withdrawal came to the fore. There are fears in society that one-sided Ukrainian troops withdrawal is taking place, while separatists are just imitating. After the *Holos* (Voice) party called to reject the Minsk agreements and freeze the conflict, the discussion of this topic began as well.

> Public and political discourses about the conflict in Donbass have hardly changed dramatically in comparison with Poroshenko's presidency. However, it has become obvious that Zelensky really strives for a peaceful resolution.

Hence, there have been more discussions about it, as in Ukraine there are many hesitations as to whether Russia really wants a peaceful end to the conflict. Also, actively discussed is the topic of the "red lines" that cannot be crossed in the negotiations.

The Normandy format summit

The chances for holding the Normandy format summit in the coming weeks has increased significantly. This is confirmed by the Kremlin, although the Russian authorities clearly played on the delay with the determination of the date of the summit. Most probably, that was a kind of psychological playing on President Zelensky's impatience.

What decisions can be expected from the summit?

It is unlikely that any final agreement or even a new idea to resolve the conflict will be agreed. For example, by agreeing on the local elections date or by the use of the international contingent of peacekeepers. There are no political prerequisites for this. Ukraine's and Russia's positions on the political resolution of the conflict remain

irreconcilable. Russia wants the two separatist republics to receive a “special status”. For Ukraine, this is unacceptable. On the issue of the local elections their positions also differ tremendously.

What can the sides reach in Paris? They can agree to coordinate, if not the schedule, at least the general logic (algorithm) of further troops withdrawal in the conflict zone with the gradual cessation of military activities. An agreement could also be reached to resume the exchange of prisoners. Moreover, the July agreements on such an exchange were not fully implemented.

Finally, they might resume work on the roadmap for the implementation of the Minsk agreements, which would link the security issues to the political clauses of the Minsk agreements. This work was interrupted at the end of 2016. Now they could resume it. In addition, if the draft roadmap is agreed, its approval could be the topic of the next Normandy Summit. However, this is the most optimistic scenario. Its chances will depend on Putin’s readiness to compromise. If the Russian position does not become more constructive, then progress will not occur.

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