Commentary
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Munich in Minsk: Stating the big regional problem

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Summary

On October 30 – November 1, Minsk hosted the Munich Security Conference Core Group meeting. This choice of location is itself a bad omen for Eastern Europe. Moreover, the results of the discussion show that no compromise solutions for the region's security have been found so far.

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The Munich Security Conference (MSC) has been the most authoritative international forum in the so-called track-1.5 diplomacy format for several decades. Exclusive groups consisting of heads of state and government, ministers and some of the world's top experts and journalists gather here, making this platform unique. The conference started as annual meetings in the capital of Bavaria, mostly engaging the military. Today, the MSC conducts active analytical work and hosts multiple events throughout the year.

The MSC Core Group meeting is the second most important format in terms of its significance and status of participants after the main conference in February. Having Minsk as the location for this event was unthinkable just a few years ago. Seeing the world's leading experts unable to find compromise solutions for the problems of East European security and even to agree on a common vocabulary in discussing these problems was even more unthinkable.

Unfortunately, this is today's reality as showcased by the MSC Core Group in Minsk yet again.

The Core Group

> The mere fact of Minsk hosting the meeting proves that Eastern Europe is still turbulent enough to send jitters across the whole of Europe and beyond.

In this context, the decision of MSC Chair Wolfgang Ischinger's team to get together in Belarus looks like a bad omen for our region.

Importantly, the Core Group meetings would normally take place in key geopolitical capitals before 2018, including in Washington (three times), Beijing (two times), Moscow, New Delhi, Teheran, as well as Doha, Vienna and Addis Ababa. Minsk was chosen not only due to its growing image of "a new Geneva" as Ischinger put it, or as a "regional diplomatic hub" as described by OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger, but because there is hardly any other place where security problems of Eastern Europe can be discussed in the traditional inclusive MSC format. This speaks volumes about the level of tensions in the region.

The attendance of the Minsk meeting was almost double the initially planned number as 100 participants arrived in Belarus compared to 60, a more usual number for the event. Attendees included the presidents of Armenia and Kosovo (unrecognized by Minsk), prime ministers of Serbia and Moldova, and ministers of foreign affairs from Slovakia, Mongolia and Poland. Chiefs of special security services from a number of European states held a separate event at the forum.

This attendance by many top officials is both a strength and a challenge for the MSC. While most sessions are held under the Chatham House rule (it allows using the information heard without any reference to the source), many discussions still turn into a platform for declaring political positions. As a result, it is not always possible to go from blaming each other to seeking practical solutions. This, however, reflects not only the flaws of the discussion format but also the state of international affairs in recent years.

What was discussed

Growing tensions between Russia and the West was a common theme of the event program. It set the general context in sessions on the situation in the Donbas, the East-West relations, arms control and confidence building, and on protracted conflicts. These have all become traditional themes in most international security conferences of recent years. It is getting more difficult to move ahead on any of them though.

> The only point on which all attendees of the Minsk meeting agreed was that international security is now in the worst place since the end of the Cold War.

Another fact is that Eastern Europe has become the epicentre of military-political escalation and needs prime attention from politicians and experts alike. Ideas on how to transform this attention into specific actions for peace and stability diverge strongly.

Most speakers also agreed that the region's core conflict has different levels. Therefore, every level requires different formats of dealing with it. Overall, at least three such levels stand out:

1. Systemic opposition between Russia and the West (there is no negotiation process on this level and none of the formats involved is dealing with this problem);

2. The military-political dimension of the conflict in the Donbas (all three existing formats, including the Normandy Four, the two-way Volker-Surkov track and partly the Trilateral Contact Group, are working on this level); and

3. The humanitarian aspect of the conflict in the Donbas (the Trilateral Contact Group deals with this. It gathers in Minsk on a biweekly basis).

The Minsk Agreements (Minsk II) touch on the second and third levels of the conflict. Respectively, all three available negotiation formats are working on implementing the Minsk Agreements, not just the Minsk format. Therefore, it is obvious that replacing it with any other, be it the Budapest, Vienna or Geneva format, as proposed by some policymakers and experts, will not solve anything.

> The problem is not about the location of the talks. Nor is it about the participants of the talks as all key actors are already part of the three existing formats. The problem lies in the lack of a model of political compromise acceptable to all parties to the conflict.

The experience of the past few years shows that such a compromise model can hardly emerge without negotiations on the first level, i.e. the level of systemic opposition between Russia and the West in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Discussions during the MSC Core Group meeting nudged those present to that idea yet again.

For now, the humanitarian component of the Minsk format, which is the core part of the Trilateral Contact Group mandate, is de facto the only one that can deliver at least some result. This is exactly what happens in practice. These results do not attract as much

media audience as they do not and cannot offer major political breakthroughs. The long-lasting talks about exchanging of prisoners, demining, setting up pension payment systems and others are unfortunately not sexy enough for media or politicians.

> The situation is further complicated by the fact that the list of the three levels of the conflict discussed at the MSC meeting is probably not final.

The latest developments in the Kerch Strait essentially create another level to be looked at separately and not only as part of the overall Russia-West opposition.

Lukashenko plan

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko attended the central session of the MSC Core Group meeting, which focused on the East-West disagreements and various aspects of them. Not unexpectedly, the military conflict in the Donbas was in the center of the discussion. Alexander Lukashenko focused on it in his speech too.

He essentially formulated several proposals which, in his view, could help stop military actions in Eastern Ukraine. His talking points included a thought on how important systematic solutions are for turning Eastern Europe into a "transborder belt of stability and cooperation." He considers the solution of the armed conflict in the Donbas to be the first mandatory step. Without it "peace on the continent will remain under threat."

Lukashenko made the following proposals:

- To continue efforts to strengthen capabilities of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission;
- To continue seeking options for deploying peacekeepers in the Donbas that all parties would find acceptable, possibly under the aegis of the UN and OSCE;
- The mission could be deployed in stages, but the longer the process takes, the more complicated the problem will get;
- To activate the work of the Normandy Four and ensure the involvement of the US in the process of negotiations. Nothing will be resolved without the US;
- If the key actors reach an agreement, Belarus could take the responsibility for ensuring peace in the eastern parts of Ukraine and for control of the Russian-Ukrainian border;
- Belarus could also accompany the election process in the Donbas based on the understanding that these regions are inseparable parts of Ukraine;

- To complement the diplomatic dialogue with contacts between MPs, representatives of regional authorities, civil society and experts.

All these proposals triggered different but lively response from attendees. The session and unofficial communication that followed left an impression that representatives of Russia and Ukraine met Lukashenko's points with the least interest (or, possibly, even rejection), whereas Western diplomats and experts looked more interested or even very interested in them. An American diplomat, who until recently was in a high position, summed up the discussion by saying that we all need a Lukashenko plan rather than one by Surkov or Volker.

The MSC Core Group meeting thus gave yet another reason to talk about many Eastern Europe's problems and highlighted difficulties in not just looking for solutions but in merely talking about these problems in the first place. In this sense, the fact of the meeting taking place in Minsk is a statement of a major regional problem. It looks like the East European issue will remain in the MSC's focus for years to come.

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