RUSSIA & EURASIA STUDIES CENTRE

Ending Russia's War Against Ukraine

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Executive Summary

This briefing paper examines the failure over the last eight years of the Minsk-based Trilateral Contact Group and Normandy Format to negotiate a peaceful settlement of Europe's only war, in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. This failure is evident in the tensions on the Russian–Ukrainian border where 175,000 Russian military forces are planned to be in place by the end of January,[1] threatening to invade Ukraine. The Minsk Trilateral Contact Group, which brings together the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe), Russia, and Ukraine), was created after the signing of ceasefire agreements in September 2014 and February 2015. The Trilateral Contact Group has worked in parallel with the Normandy Format, which brings together France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia. The threat of a Russian military invasion and crisis in Russia-West relations shows the urgent need for the West to propose a new approach to negotiating a peace settlement that by returning all sides to the negotiating table would reduce tensions in Europe and military threats to Ukraine. With France now supporting the inclusion of the US in the Normandy Format,[2] the time is right to discuss new ideas to achieving peace in the Donbas, which this paper contributes towards.

Five obstacles, which are closely inter-related, show the complexity of Russia's approach to the Ukraine crisis and why a peace agreement has not been negotiated. These obstacles are: (1) Russia's annexation of Crimea; (2) The weak influence of pro-Russian forces in Ukraine; (3) Domestic constraints in Ukraine and Russia; (4) Russian national identity and the war; and (5) Russian perceptions of Ukraine as a Western puppet state.

In the last eight years, the Normandy Format has brought together France and Germany, Ukraine, and Russia to resolve the conflict. When the Normandy Format was created in 2014, the UK and US were surprisingly not invited to join while it was assumed France and Germany would represent European interests. The Normandy Format was therefore hobbled from its inception by this choice of members. Ukraine was granted security assurances by the UK, US, and Russia in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. Russia flouted its commitments by invading and annexing Crimea and took part in the Normandy Format as the military aggressor in the conflict. The UK and US had every right and reason, and indeed a presumptive obligation, to be members of the Normandy Format. Their absence was seen by Kyiv as a failure of duty and a betrayal of trust. The US and UK minimally met their obligations by raising Russia's actions at the UN and OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) but failed to fulfil their moral obligations to Ukraine. Including the US in the Normandy Format, which France now supports,[3] would strengthen Trans-Atlantic relations and reinvigorate the peace process.

With the failure of eight years of negotiations and the backdrop of Russia's military build-up and another crisis in Russia's relations with the West it is imperative for there to be a wide-ranging discussion of new approaches to negotiating a peace agreement in Ukraine. This paper argues that one avenue could be by reforming the Normandy Format through the expansion of its members to include the UK and US, signatories to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and countries providing significant military assistance to Ukraine.'

While Russia is the primary belligerent and thus a necessary party to peace talks, its membership of the Normandy Format helps to promote the Kremlin's line that Russia is not a military participant, but merely concerned about a civil war taking place in Ukraine. Russia wants to have its cake and eat it by instigating political and ethnic instability, creating a frozen conflict run by Russian proxies, and subsequently becoming a participant in post-conflict peace negotiations, aiming to solidify the result it has sought to fashion through hybrid warfare on the ground. While Russia's participation in the Normandy Format is not desirable, it would be impossible for the Format to reach a peace agreement without Russia's presence. The integration of the US and UK into the Normandy Format could offset Russia's domineering role. The US, UK, France, and Germany should agree a common position of rejecting Russia's claim that a "civil war" is taking place in Ukraine and its demand for Kyiv to negotiate directly with Moscow's proxy entities in Russian-occupied Donbas.

The Normandy Format accepted Russia's demand to not discuss Crimea's occupation which has meant that peace negotiations have never dealt with the entirety of what transpired in the 2014 crisis. At the time the Normandy Format was set up, following the two Minsk accords in September 2014 and February 2015, Ukraine, having been defeated on the battlefield, had little option but to go along with the demands included within them which Russia insisted upon. Ukrainian politicians and public opinion have always held that Crimea and the eastern Ukrainian region of the Donbas are inter-related aspects of the same Russian military aggression and therefore cannot be separated. The

reality is that it will be very difficult for the Normandy Format to reach a peace agreement without bringing in the Crimean question. One way forward could be to hold another referendum on the status of Crimea, under the supervision of the OSCE. The March 2014 referendum held in the presence of Russian occupation forces is not recognised by any Western government or by the UN, OSCE, EU or NATO.

Germany and France, two of the three largest economies and members of the European Union, represent the bloc in the Normandy Format. Including Germany and France has, however, proven to be problematic because they are viewed by Ukraine as pursuing pro-Russian foreign policies. The inclusion of the UK and US would help to offset this imbalance.

The Normandy Format could be a vehicle to increase the UK's international presence in important regional security questions in a post-Brexit era. The UK is assisting Ukraine in the rebuilding of its navy and has acted boldly in sending HMS Defender through Ukrainian territorial waters off the Crimean coast in accordance with international law and as a signal Britain does not recognise them as Russian territorial waters.[4] The Normandy Format could also be a vehicle for the Joe Biden administration to signal its commitment to Ukrainian security. Kyiv came to hold doubts about Washington's commitments to Ukrainian security in the aftermath of the US chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and dropping of sanctions against Nord Stream II. Ukraine also became concerned that the US was focusing excessively on China, in a strategic pivot which would require improved relations with Russia. Ukraine cannot count on Western military intervention in the event of a Russian invasion because Ukraine is not a member of NATO. Nevertheless, the US and UK have repeatedly stressed during the winter 2021–2022 threat of a Russian invasion that support short of the provision of combat troops will be made available to Ukraine.

There are nine recommendations that this paper proposes policymakers in the UK and in its Western allies should consider:

After eight years of unsuccessful negotiations, Ukrainians have lost faith in the peace process. In April 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected on a platform of bringing peace to the Donbas. Nearly three years later, Zelenskyy has been unable to end the Donbas war because Russia has never entertained compromise and has only sought Ukraine's capitulation. Only 12% of Ukrainians support the Minsk peace process as it currently stands while 54% support its revision and 21% Ukraine's withdrawal. Similarly, only 11% support the Normandy Format as it currently stands while nearly half of Ukrainians (45%) would support bringing in the US and UK as new members (a similar number back including Turkey).[5] Finding a way to refresh talks is vital if they are to have legitimacy. This paper proposes six actions that policymakers in the UK and in its Western allies should consider to restore Ukrainian faith in the peace process.

- *Expand the Normandy Format:* The failure of diplomatic talks within the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group and Normandy Format have led to Russia's ultimatum for written "security guarantees". [6] It is therefore in the interests of the UK and its Western allies to reduce the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine by reinvigorating the Donbas peace process by expanding membership of the Normandy Format and moving its venue to a neutral country. France already supports the addition of the US. Also, Russia believes its only equal in the West is the US and this hold-over from the Soviet era has diminished the importance of the Normandy Format. The Normandy Format's status can only be repaired by expanding its membership to include the US.

- *Repair Damage to EU Unity:* France and Germany taking upon themselves the right to negotiate in the Normandy Format, presuming to act on behalf of Europe or the West, was received poorly by the European Commission and by other EU member states. At a time when the EU is not united over Nord Stream II or responding to Putin's ultimatum for written "security guarantees", reorganising the Normandy Format to represent the EU and NATO would restore unity and improve European security.

- *Relocate to a Neutral Country:* Minsk can no longer be the location for the Trilateral Contact Group following the breakdown of relations between the West and Belarus.[7] The OSCE and Western governments should support its relocation to a neutral country, such as Switzerland. This is made more urgent following the appointment to the post of Russian ambassador to Belarus of Putin's close and hard-line ally, the United Russia Party Chairman Boris Gryzlov. Gryzlov, who will remain Russia's representative to the Trilateral Contact Group, could be the last Russian ambassador to Belarus before it is absorbed into a closely integrated union with Russia.[8]

- *Use Correct Terminology:* The Donbas conflict should never be called a "civil war" and the situation in the Crimea should always be defined as an illegal occupation. The Kremlin's disinformation machine has repeatedly – and wrongly – sought to persuade Western audiences that Russian security forces are not involved and that the war is a product of western Ukrainian nationalist repression of Russian-speakers.[9]

- *Refuse to Negotiate with Terrorists:* The UK and its Western allies should maintain the position they have long held in the West and Ukraine of not negotiating with terrorists, the term used by the Ukrainian authorities to describe Russia's proxies in the Donbas. Ukraine has refused to heed Russia's demand that Ukraine negotiate directly with its Donbas proxies.

- *Put Crimea on the Table:* Negotiations in the Normandy Format will not be successful if the Donbas is negotiated without including Crimea whose occupation has been repeatedly condemned by the UN and is not recognised by the UK or its

Western allies. No Ukrainian president can ignore Ukrainian public opinion which has always viewed Crimea's occupation and military aggression in the Donbas as interconnected. In a June 2021 Ukrainian survey only 3.2% supported recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea in exchange for peace in the Donbas.[10]

In February 2014, Russia invaded Crimea and the following month the peninsula was annexed by the Russian Federation. Europe's first landgrab since World War II was condemned by the UK and its Western allies, and by the UN, OSCE, Council of Europe, EU, and NATO, all of which do not recognise Russian sovereignty over Crimea. In the same year, Russia sought to carve territory from Ukraine by supporting pro-Russian groups in southern-eastern Ukraine through its intelligence special forces and Russian nationalist mercenaries. Putin's project to carve out a so-called "New Russia" in southern-eastern Ukraine failed.[11]

Nevertheless, Russia artificially created the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in the 40% of the Donbas it occupied. In August 2014 and January 2015, Russian armed forces invaded Ukraine and defeated Ukrainian forces, leading to, respectively, the Minsk 1 and Minsk 2 ceasefire agreements. These Russian-imposed ceasefire agreements have never been palatable to Kyiv because they reflect the Kremlin's goal of transforming Ukraine into a "Bosnian-style" loose confederation and a "Finnish-style" neutral country that is again part of Russia's sphere of influence and no longer seeks NATO or EU membership.

Russia has failed to negotiate a peace agreement with either former Ukrainian President Poroshenko or the more moderate President Zelenskyy because it has always sought Ukraine's capitulation. Former President Leonid Kuchma, whose two terms in office from 1994–2004 meant he negotiated with both Russian Presidents Boris Yeltsyn and Putin, explained how Ukraine's negotiations with the West and Russia were completely different. With the West, these were "win-win" negotiations where both sides agreed and sought compromise. Meanwhile, Russia used negotiations with Ukraine, whose sovereignty it did not take seriously, to achieve its submission by seeking a "complete victory so as not to leave anything for the enemy".[12]

Russia's demands for written "security guarantees", put forward as an ultimatum in November–December 2021, seek to obtain the same goals in Ukraine after failing to achieve them through Ukraine's capitulation in the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group and Normandy Format. The remainder of this paper provides the background to the Russian–Ukrainian war and analyses the five obstacles to peace in Ukraine.

Background

The two Minsk ceasefire agreements negotiated in September 2014 and February 2015, led to the creation of the Trilateral Contact Group consisting of Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE. The Normandy Format was to provide mediation for the Trilateral Contact Group by Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France. While the Trilateral Contact Group has always met in Minsk, the Normandy Format has held its six meetings in different locations in France (2014, 2015, 2019), Germany (2016), Italy (2014), and only once in Belarus (2015).

Russia's Annexation of Crimea

An important barrier to achieving peace is the Crimean question. Putin has consistently said the status of Crimea is not a matter for negotiation, and its occupation by Russia was therefore never included in the two Minsk ceasefire agreements, or negotiations within the Trilateral Contact Group and Normandy Format.

With Ukrainian armed forces defeated on the battlefield, President Petro Poroshenko (2014–2019) had little choice but to accede to Russia's demand to exclude Crimea from negotiations. In contrast, President Zelenskyy has refused to do so and launched the Crimea Platform[13] to raise international awareness of its illegal occupation. Diplomatic delegations from 46 countries, including the UK and US, attended the launch of the Crimea Platform in August 2021 in Kyiv.

Exchanging Ukrainian recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea for peace in the Donbas would be unacceptable to the Ukrainian people. No Ukrainian president could go against public opinion where a mere 3.2%[14] would be willing to recognise Crimea as Russian sovereign territory in return for a peace agreement in the Donbas. Meanwhile, since its annexation in 2014, between 84 and 86%[15] of Russians have supported Crimea's so-called "reunion" with Russia. While Russia refuses to link the status of Crimea and reaching a peace agreement to end the Donbas war, Ukraine believes they are both infringements on its territorial integrity and the two cannot be separated.

Russia believes that time is on its side and pro-Russian forces will return to power in Ukraine. In 2021, Dmitri Medvedev, deputy head of Russia's Security Council, stated that Russia could not negotiate with "nationalists" in power in Ukraine, whether Presidents Yushchenko, Poroshenko or Zelenskyy, and would "Wait for the appearance of a sane leadership in Ukraine, which is aimed not at total confrontation with Russia on the brink of war, not at organizing the moronic "Crimean platforms" created to fool the country's population and pump up their muscles before the elections, but at building equal and mutually beneficial relations with Russia. It is only with such a leadership of Ukraine that it is worth dealing with."[16]

Medvedev will be waiting a long time for the election of a pro-Russian politician as president. Because Russia's goal of transforming Ukraine into a country within Russia's sphere of influence resembling Belarus will be difficult, if not unachievable in the short to medium terms, the war in eastern Ukraine will continue indefinitely and Russia will maintain its threat to invade Ukraine, as it did in April 2020 and has since November 2021.

Ukraine's pro-Russian Opposition Platform – For Life Party, one of two successors to the Party of Regions which disintegrated in February 2014, would support the recognition of Crimea as Russian in return for a Donbas peace agreement. But the Opposition Platform – For Life Party has no possibility of winning presidential or parliamentary elections. 16% of Ukrainian voters who traditionally voted for pro-Russian forces live under Russian rule in Crimea and in the DPR and LPR and are unable to vote in Ukrainian elections. The traditionally pro-Russian Communist Party of Ukraine is unable to participate in Ukrainian elections because it continues to use Soviet symbols which are banned under the 2015 decommunisation laws.[17]

Weak Pro-Russian Forces in Ukraine

The second constraint to achieving peace is that both the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group and the Normandy Format were created at a time of Ukrainian military defeat and, in Kyiv's eyes, reflect Russia's goals of seeking Ukraine's "Bosnianisation" and "Finlandisation". Not only do they ignore the Crimean question but, with Russia present in both structures, they reflect the Kremlin's official position that Russia is not involved as a military belligerent and that a "civil war" is taking place in Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reiterated that Russian security forces have never participated in the war in the Donbas and claimed that Zelenskyy's claim to the contrary was preventing a meeting of the Normandy Format.[18] President Zelenskyy's position reflects that of Ukrainian public opinion where a stable 71–72% of Ukrainians believe their country and Russia are at war, including nearly half (48%) in Ukraine's eastern region.[19]

That Russia is militarily involved in the Donbas and stationing a large concentration of forces on the border with Ukraine[20] is beyond doubt.[21] 81% of Ukrainians hold a negative opinion of Russian President Putin and therefore any negotiations with him will have little legitimacy in the eyes of the Ukrainian public.[22] Russian leaders deny their country's military involvement in the war in eastern Ukraine because it would be – unlike Crimea – unpopular in Russia.[23] Russia's turning to military means by threatening to invade Ukraine is a direct outgrowth of its failure to achieve by diplomatic means Ukraine's "Bosnianisation" and "Fin-

landisation" through the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group and Normandy Format.

Domestic Constraints to Peace in Russia and Ukraine

Domestic constraints in Russia and Ukraine will grow over time. With 84–86% of Russians supporting Crimea's supposed "reunion" with Russia, no Russian leader is likely to rescind its annexation.[24] This certainly won't happen under Putin who could potentially be in power until 2036, following the 2020 changes to the Russian constitution. Additionally, 53% of Russians have supported the detachment of Russia's two proxy enclaves in the so-called DPR and LPR either as "independent" states or through their annexation by Russia. Only 26% of Russians support these two territories remaining within Ukraine.[25]

The longer the war continues, with mounting civilian and military casualties, the wider will be the gulf between Ukraine and Russia. After eight years of war, only 12% of Ukrainians view Russia as a friendly country with 72% seeing Russia as a "hostile" neighbour.[26] Eight years of war has created 400,000 battle-hardened Ukrainian veterans of the war who are active in civil society groups and street protests. The number of veterans will grow to over one million by 2036, the date when Putin can constitutionally remain in office until. Most Ukrainian political parties seek to include veterans in their election campaigns because they already represent a large voting constituency.

Another constraint is Russia's policy of illegally distributing passports to Ukrainian citizens in the Donbas which will have reached one million, or nearly a third of the inhabitants of the DPR and LPR, by the end of 2022. 70% of Russians support the issuing of passports to Ukrainian residents of the Donbas.[27] In a deliberate insult to Zelenskyy, Russia began distributing passports in April 2019, the month he was elected president.

A large population in the Donbas with Russian passports makes it very difficult to reintegrate the region into Ukraine. Reintegration would bring many Russian citizens into Ukraine whom the Kremlin would claim a right to protect, giving Russia carte blanche to interfere in Ukraine's domestic affairs. This justification was used by Russia in August 2008 when it invaded Georgia to "protect" Russian citizens in South Ossetia.

Russian National Identity and the War

The fourth obstacle is the deeper question of Russian national identity towards Ukraine. As Putin's nearly 6000-word article in 2021 stated, Russian leaders do not recognise the existence of Ukraine as an independent country because it is allegedly composed of "Russian" lands wrongly included in Ukraine by the found-

ers of the Soviet state. [28] Russian leaders do not see Ukrainians as a separate people, believing they are the Little Russian branch of the pan-Russian nation (alongside Great Russians [Russians] and White Russians [Belarusians]).

Russian chauvinism towards Ukraine and its neighbours has existed since the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. Russian presidents have always viewed Eurasia (i.e., the USSR minus the three Baltic states) as its exclusive sphere of influence and its neighbours, the non-Russian former Soviet republics such as Ukraine, as not exhibiting full sovereignty. Within the Kremlin's larger geopolitical understanding of Eurasia, Putin reserves a special place for Ukraine which Russian nationalists believe should be part of the Russian World. With Russia and Belarus establishing an ever-closer union, Ukraine is the missing part of the Russian World.

Russian Perceptions of Ukraine as a US and EU Puppet State

The fifth constraint is that Ukrainian leaders, including President Zelenskyy, are seen by Russia to be puppets of the US and EU. In 2021, Medvedev[29] wrote that "Ukrainian leaders of the current generation are absolutely dependent people" because Ukraine "is under direct foreign control". He claimed that Ukraine is being used by Washington for its anti-Russian crusades because "Ukraine itself has no value on the line of direct confrontation between Western forces (including potentially military ones) with our country."

Russia therefore views the war in Ukraine as a proxy war with the West. The Kremlin has always held the view that western Ukrainian "fascists" launched a "putsch" in February 2014 and illegally removed pro-Russian President Yanukovych.[30] The removal of Yanukovych in February 2014 prevented Putin accomplishing his goal of bringing Ukraine into the Eurasian Economic Union, which had sparked the Euromaidan demonstrations in November 2013 when the Kremlin's pressure led to the cancellation of Ukraine signing an Association Agreement with the EU. In subsequent elections in 2014 and in 2019, pro-Russian forces were trounced, and pro-Western forces took control of Ukraine.

In the Kremlin's eyes, and those of Russian nationalists, most Ukrainians are "Little Russians" who want to be part of the Russian World. They are prevented from this by Western Ukrainian fascists who have ruled Ukraine since the 2014 "putsch" and by the West which controls Ukraine.

In this worldview, Zelenskyy's unwillingness to capitulate to Russian demands is explained by the Kremlin as him having become a puppet of Ukrainian nationalists and the US. According to Medvedev: "The current president of this exhausted

country is a person with certain ethnic roots, who spoke Russian all his life. More-over, he worked in Russia and received significant funds from Russian sourc-es. Nevertheless, at a certain moment, having become the head of state, out of fear of getting another "Maidan" directed against his personal power, he com-pletely changed his political and moral orientation. In fact, he renounced his iden-tity. He began to earnestly serve the most rabid nationalist forces in Ukraine..."[31]

Although this Russian view of Ukraine as a US puppet state may deepen if the US joins the Normandy Format, without Washington it will be impossible to achieve progress towards peace – as the last eight years have shown. Russia itself be-lieves the main country it should negotiate with for written "security guarantees"[32] is the US and has ridiculed the EU as a negotiating partner.

Reviving the Peace Process

There are a number of obstacles to peace which are a mixture of immovable constraints and others that need to be negotiated. Russia has been allowed to make demands to-wards Ukraine and the West without offering any compromises of its own. If this is allowed to continue there will be no peace agreement and tensions will continue to periodically arise during Putin's long-term rule of Russia.

The failure of the Donbas peace process, Russia's military build-up on Ukraine's border and Putin's ultimatum to the West are closely related. The Kremlin is making demands towards Ukraine and the West, both NATO and the EU, while not offering any compromis-es of its own. Ahead of US-Russian talks on 10 January, Russia's deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov said "We will not agree to any concession. That is completely excluded."[33] Russia's approach in these talks is the same as that it has used in earlier US-Russian resets, each of which failed due to Russian unwillingness to adapt its policies while de-manding concessions from the West.[34]

The Normandy Format will continue to be a talking shop with no concrete results if it con-tinues with its existing membership of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine. Six meetings of the Normandy Format over eight years of war (two in 2014, two in 2015, one in 2016, and only one in 2019) have not brought a peace agreement any closer. Although Zelen-skyy is wholeheartedly committed to peace, he will never agree to Putin's demands for Ukraine's capitulation. Neither will NATO or the EU agree to Putin's current ultimatum.

Including the UK and US within the Normandy Format could have three beneficial effects. The first would be to rectify the widely held view in Ukraine that the Bu-dapest Memorandum was a worthless piece of paper. The fact that the Budapest Memorandum's security assurances to Ukraine were infringed by Russia while the US and UK in 2014 failed to fulfil their moral obligations to Ukraine sheds a dark shadow over hopes for worldwide nuclear disarmament. Why would North Korea give up nuclear weapons if it believed its security and territorial integrity could

be threatened in the same manner as Ukraine following its nuclear disarmament? Most ironic of all, Russia – the country which infringed its commitments under the Budapest Memorandum – is a member of the Normandy Format while the US and UK are not. If the UK and US were to be included in the Normandy Format, all three countries that signed the Budapest Memorandum with Ukraine would be members (as opposed to only Russia).

The second good reason for including leading NATO members the UK and the US is that Ukraine was allowed to consult with them on threats to its security through the 1994 NATO Partnership for Peace Programme and 1997 Charter on a Distinctive Partnership with NATO.

The third reason to include the UK and US would be to offset traditionally Russophile Germany and France and thereby boost Ukraine's confidence that the Normandy Format would not implement Putin's goals of "Bosnianisation" and "Finlandisation." Until 2014, Ukraine was distrustful of Germany and France because Kyiv viewed both countries as pro-Russian members of NATO and the EU. This view hardened after the 2008 NATO summit where Germany and France's opposition led to NATO turning down Ukraine's appeal to be invited into a MAP (Membership Action Plan). A year later in 2009, leading Ukrainian national security expert Volodymyr Horbulin told the US Ambassador to Ukraine: "There are two Russian embassies in Kyiv; only one speaks German."[35]

Ukrainians are suspicious that German politicians routinely criticise Ukraine for defending its territory, recently with drones purchased from Turkey,[36] while ignoring Russian drone and other military attacks against Ukrainian forces. President Zelenskyy responded saying: "When the Ukrainian army feels the need to defend its land, it does so. And it will further act under this principle."[37] In a comment to the German newspaper Bild,[38] the Ukrainian ambassador to Germany, Andrij Melnyk, was more adamant, saying Ukraine "rejects today's warning from the [German] Foreign Office" because Ukraine has "the legitimate right to self-defence if its territory is bombarded day and night with heavy Russian weapons and if civilians and soldiers are killed."[39] Ukraine called on the German government "to redouble its efforts as a mediator in order to convene a Normandy Format summit in Berlin as agreed and to put Moscow in its place."[40]

Kyiv's view of Germany changed after 2014 because of Chancellor Angela Merkel's tough stance on European sanctions against Russia in response to its occupation of Crimea and military aggression against Ukraine. Merkel's replacement is an unknown politician in Ukraine and it is still too early to know if there will be continuity with the former chancellor's policies towards Russia and Ukraine, including supporting EU sanctions. If Russia invades Ukraine, Germany will also come under intense pressure from its NATO and EU allies to cancel the Nord Stream II pipeline.

Following the victory of the Social Democrats in the September 2021 German elections, Kyiv is concerned that German foreign policy will return to that encapsulated by the term Putinversteher (Putin Understanders) prior to the 2014 crisis. The Nord Stream II gas pipeline will cost Ukraine $3 billion a year in gas transit fees. Importantly, the Nord Stream II gas pipeline undermines European security by sowing division among EU members and raises the prospect of an escalation in the Russian–Ukrainian war because Russia will no longer be concerned about a war inside Ukraine disrupting the export of gas.[41] With Ukraine's gas pipelines no longer important for Russia's gas exports, Ukraine and central-eastern Europe fear Russia's hands are no longer tied if it wishes to escalate the war.

Ukrainian views of France also changed because of former President François Hollande's similarly tough response to Russia's military aggression in Ukraine. As with the departure of Chancellor Merkel, there are potential danger signs on the horizon in France.

The popularity of populist nationalist Eric Zemmour[42] is increasing and it could be him, rather than Le Pen, facing Macron in the second round of the 2022 French presidential elections. The Kremlin has switched its support to Zemmour who is open about his disdain for NATO and the EU.[43] Zemmour said: "My first reflex is to defend Russia… I am for alliance with Russia. I think that it would be the most reliable ally, more than the Americans, more than the Germans, more than the English."[44] Zemmour continued: "When we were with Russia, we won wars, when we were against Russia, we lost wars." [45]

Although Macron did not exhibit pro-Russian tendencies in the 2017 French elections, countries in central-eastern Europe and Ukrainians were alarmed by his description of NATO as "brain-dead"[46] and his proposals to forgive Russia and improve relations. President Macron's visit to Ukraine in November 2022 will be the first by a French president for nearly a quarter of a century, a reflection of Paris and Berlin's prioritisation of relations with Russia.

Conclusion

It is important for European and US policymakers to understand the complexities of Crimea and the Donbas outlined in this paper and why there is no easy path to a peace agreement. We should also understand that Russia and the West have different objectives towards Ukraine. The West rejects the concept of spheres of influence, believes the 1945 Yalta Agreement should be consigned to the history books, will not accept Russia's demand to hold a veto over NATO and EU enlargement, and believes Ukraine is an independent, sovereign country that has a right to decide its geopolitical orientation and which international organisations it joins. Russia demands that the US recognises Eurasia as its exclusive sphere of

influence and wants this codified in written "security guarantees" at a summit resembling that held at Yalta in 1945, does not respect Ukraine as an independent, sovereign country, and is adamant that Kyiv has no right to choose where it geopolitically belongs. The West seeks the de-occupation of Crimea, an end to the war in the Donbas and the return of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Russia refuses to negotiate Crimea's status and will only end its undeclared war against Ukraine if Kyiv agrees to capitulate and become "Bosnianised" and "Finlandised".[47]

The current crisis in Russia's relations with the West and its threat to invade Ukraine are directly related to the failure of peace negotiations in the last eight years. Rethinking the peace process is urgently required to defuse tension not only on the Russian–Ukrainian border but also in Russia's relations with the West. The way to rethink the peace process and reduce tensions would be to expand the Normandy Format, a step made easier by France's support for bringing in the US, and move the Trilateral Contact Group away from Minsk to Switzerland.[48] Belarus cannot be the location for meaningful peace negotiations.

Delivering peace and preventing a dramatic escalation of Russia's hybrid war into a full-scale conflict in eastern Ukraine is an important security consideration for the UK, the US, NATO, and the EU. There has been no meeting of the Normandy Format for over two years since December 2019. This impasse in the peace process will continue and tensions will remain high between Russia and Ukraine and the West for the foreseeable future unless the West is united around a new approach to securing peace.

Leaving the Normandy Format in its current form will not bring peace to the Donbas and could lead to an escalation of the Russian–Ukrainian war which would be catastrophic for European security. Including the UK and US, two countries that hold moral obligations to Ukraine's security under the Budapest Memorandum, would breathe fresh life into Normandy Format negotiations and provide a semblance of balance against Russia's demands towards Ukraine and its ultimatum to the West while allaying Ukraine's concerns about Germany and France siding with Russia.

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