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## THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT AS THE MAIN DRIVER OF NEW CONFRONTATION IN EUROPE

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The deadlocked conflict between Russia and Ukraine remains, as of Spring 2017, the most direct challenge to security in Europe and the most powerful driver of the confrontation between Russia and the West. This confrontation is significantly different from the essentially static posture of the Cold War, from the late 1940s to the late 1970s, and it is the unique nature of the Russia-Ukraine conflict that determines many of the differences. While the level of military balance along the front-line in the Eastern Ukraine is an order of magnitude lower than it was along the inner-German border 40 years ago, the risk of a sudden eruption of armed hostilities is higher.

The ceasefire in the Donbass war zone is routinely violated by exchanges of heavy fire, and high-intensity clashes, like the battle for Avdiivka in early February 2017, threaten to destroy it altogether. Neither party to the conflict has any intention of implementing the Minsk-II agreement (February 2015) or any expectations that the other party would live to its commitments. At the same time, the belligerents as well as external guarantors of the agreement are confident that there could not be an alternative to this dysfunctional deal. The Ukrainian leadership has established a reasonably

reliable control over the units deployed along the front-line, but Moscow is struggling with maverick field-commanders, so the most notorious figures, like Motorola (Pavlov) or Givi (Tolstyh) are eliminated.

Artillery duels in Donbass resonate directly in the tensions along Russia's frontier with Europe, first of all in the Black Sea theatre. Moscow has turned the illegally annexed Crimea into a "bastion", from which Russian Navy and Air Force could dominate NATO's southern flank, including the US missile defense base at Deveselu, Romania. Ukraine is eager to be a useful ally for NATO, which after significantly boosting its deterrence posture in the Baltic theatre, is now paying greater attention to the Black Sea. For Russia, the key strategic issue now is security of the crucial sea line of communications from Novorossiysk and Sevastopol to its military grouping in Syria.

With all the significance of military-strategic matters, it is also the economic dimension of the Russia-Ukraine conflict that impacts on the transformation of European security. Despite grave predictions, Moscow is actually not able to turn its natural gas export to the EU through Ukraine into a political "weapon". In fact, Gazprom has been trying extra-hard to preserve its share of the Eu-

ropean gas market and so has to behave as a reliable supplier. It seeks to advance two pipeline projects going around Ukraine (Nord-Stream-2 and TurkStream), but presently various Russian-Ukrainian economic quarrels spare their gas business.

Russia's strategy in the conflict with Ukraine is based on the premise that the interruption of trade ties and the loss of valuable assets in Donbass would bring Ukraine's economy to default and collapse. Kiev is indeed under a lot of pressure and the advancement of reforms is slow and painful, but it is able nevertheless, to secure crucial financial support from IMF and the EU. Russian economy is also suffering from the conflict, and many enterprises in the military-industrial complex struggle to achieve import substitution from Ukraine. Protracted stagnation is the best economic scenario for Russia in the near- and mid-term, and its hopes for a new spike in oil prices are as futile as are the expectations of a significant relaxation of Western economic sanctions.

For both protagonists, the present deadlock in hostilities is unacceptable, but Ukraine gains more from the pro-

longation of the status-quo than Russia. While Ukraine step-by-step progresses in domestic rehabilitation and in moving closer to Europe, Russia sinks into decline and is stuck in confrontation, which it cannot hope to win. It has no allies in conflict with Ukraine, as even Belarus sticks to neutrality, while China makes clear its preference for stability. Effective control over the quasi-independent parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions involves significant economic burden and military challenge for Russia, while making little strategic sense. The option of retreating from Eastern Ukraine and pushing the problem of its economic reconstruction on Kiev might appear politically attractive, but is personally unacceptable for President Putin, who fears to be seen as weak. A new Russian military offensive aimed at opening a land corridor to Crimea is a grave risk for Ukraine and a serious threat for the NATO/EU-centric European security system. Moscow counts on the Ukraine "fatigue" as well as on deepening discord in the EU, but it is the domestic discontent that might force the Kremlin to attempt another "patriotic mobilization" by the means of military victory.