

Along the contact line: An end to the war in eastern Ukraine looks as far away as ever

Even peace talks have ground to a halt

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“DO YOU know where you’re heading?” asks Andrei, a wide-eyed Ukrainian soldier stationed at the edge of government-controlled territory in the country’s war-torn east. On the other side of the front line, Artyom, a burly border guard in the Russian-backed separatist enclave, passes his days in a booth adorned with a “Donetsk People’s Republic” emblem and two portraits—Vladimir Putin, Russia’s president, and Ramzan Kadyrov, the brutal ruler of Chechnya. There Artyom interrogates arrivals who arouse his suspicions, inquiring about their allegiance while rubbing a combat knife strapped to his left thigh.

As the war in Ukraine drags into its fifth year, there is still no end in sight. Large swathes of the Donbas region remain under the control of separatists. A 500-km “contact line”, bristling with landmines, cuts through it. More than 10,000 people have been killed there since 2014. Casualties continue to pile up, although at a slower rate than in the past. Earlier this month, three schoolboys were blown up by a landmine not far from Artyom’s post. In Avdiivka, a front-line town in Ukrainian government-controlled territory, even a recent stretch of relatively quiet months seems ominous: “When things are calm for a long time, it usually ends badly,” says Olga, a doctor stationed there. Talks aimed at resolving the conflict have ground to a halt ahead of Ukraine’s presidential and parliamentary elections next year.

Although the world’s attention has shifted, Ukrainians still see the war as the country’s most important issue, surpassing corruption and the economy. Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine’s president, has employed a slogan: “We stopped the aggressor and defended the country!” Yet few place much faith in the Minsk II agreement, the accords signed in 2015 that call for the separatist-held territories to return to Ukrainian control and be granted a nebulous “special status”. These comprise large parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts*. Disputes over implementation have been stuck in a vicious circle for years: Ukraine argues that security and control over the border with Russia should come before political steps; Russia insists on receiving political guarantees before relinquishing control of the territory it holds. Many in Ukraine believe the accords, imposed during a ferocious Russian advance, are a rotten deal. Continuing to rely on them is “like riding a dead horse”, argues one MP.

Privately officials acknowledge that the Minsk agreements will need to be amended, expanded or even replaced before a settlement can be reached. One addition under discussion is a UN peacekeeping mission. Kurt Volker, the American special representative for Ukraine, says several countries have already agreed to contribute forces, among them Sweden, Finland, Belarus, Turkey and Austria. Yet negotiations with Russia over the mandate have ground to a halt. Until

Mr Putin decides otherwise, the smouldering status quo will endure. There has been no meeting between Mr Volker and his Russian counterpart, Vladislav Surkov, since January. Plainly, Russia has decided to wait to see what happens at the elections, hoping to end up with more pliable counterparts in Kiev, if not as president, then at least controlling a large chunk of parliament.

In the meantime, the separatist republic in Donetsk plans to hold its own pseudo-elections this November, following the assassination of its nominal head, Alexander Zakharchenko, at a café in Donetsk in August—the latest of several commanders to meet untimely deaths on their home turf. While Russian and separatist officials blame his killing on Kiev and the West, an inside job looks more likely, with Russia seeking to clear away troublesome local leaders. Yet throughout Donetsk, Mr Zakharchenko's likeness still adorns billboards, alongside such quotes as “We have one motherland and that is Russia.”

Though the division of the Donbas is artificial, the longer the rupture remains, the harder reintegration will become. “The sides seem determined to reinforce their positions on the ground and their physical separation from each other,” argues a recent report by the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based watchdog.

Even if the troops eventually retreat, the basic steps necessary for political reconciliation, such as drawing up voter lists for credible elections, will be devilishly difficult. Over 1.5m people have been displaced. Crossing the contact line illustrates the estrangement: those leaving Ukrainian government-held territory have their passports stamped as if leaving the country; visitors to separatist-held territory are issued “migration cards”, copies of a document handed out in Russia. The separatist authorities have commandeered telecoms infrastructure and launched a local phone network called “Phoenix”, which, symbolically, cannot connect with Ukrainian cell-phone networks.

For civilians on both sides, the political games have gone on far too long. Most want an end to the conflict, whatever the final configuration may be. Despite the fighting, they try to hang on to the pleasures of normal life. In Avdiivka, Evgeniy, a sandy-haired teenager, skips home from school past a shrapnel-scarred apartment block, though he admits that “the nights are still scary.” Long passes soar over a football pitch nearby where locals still play. Across the line in Donetsk, maintenance workers keep central gardens neatly sculpted. The opera theatre advertises new autumn productions, including “Turandot” and Alexander Pushkin's “The Queen of Spades”. Yet like the elusive Ace in Pushkin's drama, peace for the people of eastern Ukraine is out of reach.

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