



Prospects for a UN Peacekeeping Mission to Donbas

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During the September United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Russia and Ukraine each presented proposals for the deployment of a peacekeeping mission to Donbas. However, the differences between the two countries reduce the probability of reaching agreement on that issue. From Ukraine's perspective, the mission should be deployed in all territory controlled by Russia and its goal should be the demilitarisation of Donbas. Russia, in proposing to send a peacekeeping mission to eastern Ukraine, hopes to return to the discussion of a new security architecture in Europe.

Essence and Motives of the Russian Proposal. On 5 September, the Russian Federation submitted a resolution to the UN Secretariat on the deployment of peacekeeping forces in Donbas. According to the proposal, the mission should be located along the so-called “demarcation line” between the areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk districts controlled by irregular Russian troops and the rest of Ukraine with the purpose to protect the OSCE special monitoring mission (SMM). There has been an intensification of attacks on SMM observers by separatists supported by Russia. On 22 September, the faction announced it would end protection of the OSCE base in Horlivka, which is under their control. According to the Russian proposal, the UN forces would be equipped only with light weapons, which may be not enough to carry out their peacekeeping mission.

With their proposal, the Russians hope to prompt the U.S. to back away from considering selling defensive weapons systems to Ukraine. There is intensive debate on the subject in the U.S. The idea of increasing military aid to Ukraine is supported by influential members of Congress and some in President Donald Trump's administration, including Kurt Volker, the U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations.

By demonstrating flexibility to solve the political situation in Donbas, Russia also expects that the countries supporting Ukraine will increase pressure on the government in Kyiv to implement the Minsk agreements. The “Steinmeier formula,” proposed by Germany in the framework of the Normandy format of negotiations on the conflict, used by Russia and imposed on Ukraine, assumes the parallel implementation of the provisions of the Minsk agreements on security issues (a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy armament from the front line) and political changes (elections in the occupied territories, special status in the Ukrainian constitution for Donbas). So far, the Ukrainian government has rejected implementation of the Minsk terms because military operations are ongoing in Donbas.

Ukraine's Position on the Russian Proposal. Russia's resolution project, submitted on the eve of the opening of the new UNGA, beat Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's own proposal, presented during his speech later to the assembly. Russia clearly had hoped that the Ukrainian authorities, which must agree to the deployment of the mission in their country, would reject the proposal. This would allow Russia to blame Ukraine for obstructing the efforts to change the situation in Donbas.

So far, the Ukrainian authorities have not put their proposal into resolution form, stressing the need to agree a common position with international partners. However, the adoption and implementation of the Russian proposal may lead to the freezing of the conflict, which would be unfavourable for Ukraine.

It would mean the government in Kyiv still will not control part of its own territory or the Russia-Ukraine border, and further, recognition by the international community of the “authorities” of the separatist republics as independent political subjects, as well as sanctioning the presence of irregular Russian troops in Donbas.

From the Ukrainian point of view, any UN peacekeeping mission—which the authorities in Kyiv requested in 2015—should lead to the demilitarisation of areas *de facto* controlled by Russia. Therefore, Ukraine is stressing that the UN peacekeeping mandate should cover all the territory of Donbas controlled by Russia and should include access to the Russia-Ukraine border and weapons storage areas, a position supported by the U.S. and Germany. At the same time, Ukraine rejects any kind of negotiations with the separatists, who are politically dependent on Russia. It also opposes the inclusion of Russian troops in any UN mission, which is a stance compatible both with Ukrainian law as well as UN practice, according to which units from countries bordering another country where peacekeepers are placed cannot be involved in the mission. Moreover, it underlined that one condition for placement of the UN mission be the withdrawal of Russian troops from Donbas.

However, it is possible that the Russian proposal will be the basis for further negotiations, which would reduce the probability that Russia will use its veto during voting in the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Donbas Dilemma. Russia’s main aim is still to regain political and economic control over Ukraine. Therefore, withdrawal of Russian troops from Donbas is not probable. At the same time, a UN peacekeeping mission would reduce the financial burden on Russia due to its presence in eastern Ukraine, estimated to cost it around a billion euros per year to support the separatist republics. What is more, Ukraine actually would have to bear the cost of rebuilding infrastructure destroyed during the war. Moreover, forcing the Ukrainian government to cooperate with the separatist authorities in Donetsk and Luhansk would reduce the need for contact between the self-declared republics and the Russians, who seem uncertain of the separatists’ loyalty. At the same time, any problems that may arise concerning the future status of Donbas would give Russia the opportunity to blame the government in Kyiv.

The establishment of the mission is aimed to change the image of Russia as aggressor in the conflict with the hope of creating favourable conditions for talks on the gradual abolition of the sanctions imposed by the EU and the U.S. At the same time, the Russian authorities want to maintain an instrument of influence over the socio-political situation in Ukraine. The establishment of a UN mission would mean the need to implement the Minsk agreement provisions, which are unpopular in Ukraine, especially those connected to granting special status to Donbas and holding elections there. With the informal election campaign for President of Ukraine already underway, this solution would mean a high political cost for Poroshenko, who in recent times and under social pressure has been pursuing a policy of gradual isolation of the occupied territories. In March this year, Poroshenko approved a trade blockade of the areas and Ukraine subsequently cut the supply of electricity to areas of Donbas outside the control of the government in Kyiv. At the moment, Ukraine’s authorities are drafting a law concerning occupied territories.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Agreement on a UN peacekeeping mission to Donbas is unlikely because of the significant divergence in Russia’s and Ukraine’s positions on its mandate. Also, the U.S. has referred negatively to the Russian proposal. However, this issue will be the subject of discussions within the UNSC. Poland will soon take a seat as a non-permanent member and can use the Russian project to broaden the debate not only on the situation in Donbas but also to Crimea, annexed by Russia.

The situation in Donbas, where military operations are still ongoing, is used by the Russian authorities as an instrument to politically and socially destabilise Ukraine. At the same time, Russia views the debate on its resolution on a UN peacekeeping mission to Donbas as a chance to return to the wider discussion about the new security architecture in Europe. By seeking to reset its image as a country that seeks peaceful solutions, it only strengthens its position in this discussion.

However, it should be remembered that for the Russian authorities, the creation of a new security architecture also means the recognition of so-called spheres of influence.

The Russian project indicates that the country wants to escape responsibility for its lack of implementation of the Minsk agreements. A UN peacekeeping mission, would transfer that responsibility to both the UN and the Ukrainian authorities and allow Russia to intensify its efforts to lift the EU and U.S. sanctions.