

E-PAPER

Conference Report

# The Future of Peace and Security in Europe

Ukrainian-Russian-Polish-German  
Quadrilateral Discussions

**DOMINIQUE ORSINI**

A publication of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, June 2018

# The Future of Peace and Security in Europe

By **Dominique Orsini**

## Contents

1	Preface	3
2	Introduction	5
3	Rethinking the European Security Order	7
	The Region's Current Security Crisis: Competing Narratives	7
	What Basis for a New European Security Order?	8
4	Eastern Ukraine: Looking for Peace in Europe	10
	Background to the Conflict	10
	The Media Landscape in Eastern Ukraine	11
	Eastern Ukraine's Internally Displaced Persons	11
	The 2017 Blockade of Donbas	12
5	What Values for a Common European Future?	15
	Dealing with the Region's Past	15
	Contemporary Political Discourse and Populism in the Region	17
6	Conclusion: The Need for Shared Narratives to Bolster European Security	20
7	Participants of the Quadrilogue Discussion Process	22
	The Author	24
	Imprint	24

# 1 Preface

At the start of 2015, fierce battles were raging in the eastern part of Ukraine. Russian-supported separatists and Russian military forces that had invaded Ukraine were inflicting serious defeats on Ukrainian forces; thousands of people died. A first ceasefire agreement (Minsk I), negotiated in September 2014 with the involvement of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Russia and Ukraine, had completely collapsed. Initially, Minsk II, agreed in February 2015, actually resulted in an intensification of the fighting before its first measures were implemented. The war in the eastern part of Ukraine has since settled in at a lower level of escalation; the daily violations of the ceasefire and the ongoing military and civilian casualties seldom make it into the international headlines.

In the spring of 2015, with tensions and alienation at their highest, the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the organisers of what was later to become the European Dialogue Expert Group – an association of liberal Russian individuals and organisations from the spheres of academia, the media and civil society – launched an initiative to start a process of dialogue among members of expert communities from Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Germany. The intent was to reflect on ways to rescue, or to re-establish, at the moment of its most profound crisis, an architecture for European peace and security, such as appeared to have been achieved after the end of the Cold War and the reaffirmation of the Helsinki Accords of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in the 1990 Paris Charter.

The first meeting, held in September 2015, was followed by conferences in Warsaw and Kyiv, and then in Potsdam once again, and then by a joint trip to the conflict-stricken Donbas region undertaken by members of the group. All meetings were held under Chatham House Rule.

The dialogue process turned out to be difficult and protracted. Participants needed time to get to know each other and build up a foundation of trust. Over time, an atmosphere of open and very intense conversation developed, one in which the group was able to discuss not only the major points of opposition between Russia and the EU or the conflict in and around Ukraine but also the many contradictory and in many cases critical developments in all four of the countries represented.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation decided to document this Quadrilogue discussion process, as it was called, in the form of the present report, summing up the state of discussion arrived at during the last meeting in Potsdam in November 2017. Due to the difficult starting conditions and circumstances of the Quadrilogue process, this report does not measure up to the standards of a policy paper and does not offer any jointly agreed policy recommendations. It sums up the main topics and disagreements of various discussion sessions.

Arguments and conclusions are not to be associated with individual participants. The report has been written by a rapporteur and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of participants involved. The responsibility for its content lies solely with the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

It is vital to intensify the work on an architecture for peace across Europe that is based on the principles of Helsinki and Paris. The purpose of this report is to provoke further discussions on how this can be done without losing sight of the causes of the current crisis or suggesting that all parties bear equal responsibility or offering simple solutions that come at a cost that others will have to pay. Naturally, no x of this topic can escape the fact that overcoming the crisis will be impossible in the absence of the political will to attain a peaceful settlement of war in Donbas, one which entails respect for the sovereignty of Ukraine.

*Ellen Ueberschär and Walter Kaufmann; March 2018*

## 2 Introduction

Is a common European future possible for Germany, Poland, Ukraine and Russia? Recent developments between these countries seem to suggest it is not: the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014; a (virtual) state of war between Russia and Ukraine that has left tens of thousands dead and more than two million displaced; a significant deterioration in relations between Poland and its neighbours (including Germany, Ukraine and Russia) after the Law and Justice party took power in 2015; and in recent years a sharp increase in political, diplomatic and military tensions between Russia and its Western neighbours.

Yet this state of affairs is not unavoidable. It is the result of disregard for established norms and principles that have governed security relations between these countries for the last quarter of a century, but also of elections and conscious political choices.

A group of like-minded civil society actors and think-tank experts from Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Germany (hereafter: the region) met on several occasions, beginning in the autumn of 2015, under the auspices of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung. They attempted to imagine a new security order for Europe, debate the question of a possible common European future for their region and explore ways out of the current crisis between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the West. This report attempts to take stock of the informative, passionate and stimulating discussions that have taken place over the last two years. However, it does not claim to offer ready-made solutions to the problems that these four countries are currently experiencing.

Priority has been given to discussing the state of affairs in the region, starting from the question of whether the current security order in Europe still fulfils its purpose, especially in light of the conflict in and around Ukraine. From the outset, participants agreed that a renewed European security order must be based on already agreed values and principles, and in particular on respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states. There was also consensus that the 1975 Helsinki Final Act should continue to serve as the foundation for security and cooperation in Europe. As for the crisis in Ukrainian-Russian relations, participants agreed that a series of violations of the Helsinki principles led to the crisis, and that a resolution must be based on the same principles contained in the Helsinki Final Act.

Some of the discussions of this Quadrilogue took place in working groups that tackled three main topics. First, the question of the broader security order in Europe was examined. Why is it in crisis? How can it be revived? And can it be reformed before the conflict in and around Ukraine is addressed? Second, the situation in eastern Ukraine was debated. What can be done to improve the situation in Donbas? What role can civil society play? Quadrilogue participants chose to focus on three topics related to civil society in eastern Ukraine: media, displacement and the blockade of Donbas. Finally, the question of what values could strengthen the European security order was discussed. Should this security order be

grounded in European values of democracy such as separation of powers, respect for individual rights and the rule of law? Is this possible at all, in light of the rise of populism across the continent? Should a process of de-Sovietisation first take place in order to learn from the past and thus avoid similar mistakes in the future?

This report is divided into three sections that reflect the Quadrilogues working group topics. While this report draws on the findings of the working groups, it also reflects other discussions that took place as part of the Quadrilogue.

### 3 Rethinking the European Security Order

The current security order in Europe has come under tremendous stress over the last few years, not least because of the annexation of Crimea and events in Donbas since 2014. Competing narratives have been put forward to explain the crisis of the continent's security order, but these only reinforce existing divisions, undermine any possible shared understanding of threats and reduce the scope for solutions. Moreover, the conflict in eastern Ukraine and Crimea's annexation have demonstrated that the existing security order in Europe was not designed to respond to serious violations of the principles that were agreed in the Helsinki Final Act.

#### The Region's Current Security Crisis: Competing Narratives

Both the European security architecture and Russia's relations with the rest of the region are in need of significant repair. Grievances are manifold on all sides: Russian military and non-military interference (not least through social media) in other countries is held up against Western support (understood here as the member countries of NATO and the EU) for political transition in countries neighbouring Russia and potentially in Russia itself. The creation and expansion of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) have been contributing to political and, to a limited extent, economic competition with the European Union. In military affairs, some measure of rearmament, a breakdown of arms control mechanisms and confidence-building measures, and provocative military actions (such as Russian aircraft violating NATO's airspace) have increased tensions. More importantly, in contrast with the rather stable order of the Cold War, today's situation is dynamic and unpredictable, making it even more dangerous. Trust, in particular, is sorely lacking between all sides, and competing narratives about the breakdown of relations between Russia and the West only feed a sense that the other side is at fault.

From a Russian perspective, NATO violated the European security order with its intervention in Kosovo in 1999 (followed by Western support for Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008), the establishment of US missile defence in central and eastern Europe (including Poland), the EU's offer of an Association Agreement with Ukraine and perceived encouragement of the Maidan movement. For the West, the war in 2008 against Georgia and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states marked a negative turn in relations with Moscow. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the *Novorossiia* (New Russia) project in eastern Ukraine violated not only the territorial integrity and sovereignty of another state, but also the European security order.

Going further back in time to 1990, NATO's eastern enlargement, which started with the integration of East Germany into the NATO Alliance (through Germany's reunification), remains a significant cause of disagreement in the region. Two broad, competing views

regarding the wisdom of this expansion lie at the heart of the debate. The Russian viewpoint holds that as the European order agreed at Yalta fell apart and NATO expanded eastward, Russian security interests were simply ignored in each wave of enlargement despite frequent warnings from Moscow. The other perspective, supported by most Europeans, denies Russia a right to be consulted in the sovereign choices of independent countries to join alliances, even if these nations used to be members of the former communist bloc.

Ukraine and its Western partners strongly object to the idea that these countries are to be considered «in-between» the West and Russia, and therefore not entirely masters of their own destinies. Moscow's suggestion, for example, that a precondition for settling the conflict in Donbas is for Ukraine to become a neutral state is viewed in Kyiv as a direct attempt to infringe upon the country's sovereignty. Moreover, many in Ukraine would find a commitment to neutrality under the current circumstances ill-advised unless Russia disengages from Ukraine first. The fate of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum illustrates the rationale for such an approach: the agreement, signed by Russia, was supposed to guarantee Ukraine's territorial integrity in exchange for Kyiv permanently giving up its nuclear arsenal.

If NATO expansion continues to be regarded as a strategic hazard by the Kremlin, is the EU viewed as dangerous a threat? Moscow believes that the EU's policies (such as the Eastern Partnership) and its growing influence in the former Soviet Union encroach upon its traditional sphere of influence, and in particular interfere with the Russia-led EEU. The EU's soft power (also described as its «transformative power») is perhaps regarded as equally dangerous by the Kremlin. As the prospect of a closer relationship with the EU has encouraged and sustained democratic movements in countries that used to be in Moscow's orbit, there is significant concern in Russia that such transformations may one day reach the country and threaten the regime's stability. This perceived threat is grounded in the Kremlin's belief that the EU's governance model (as a union of democratic nations) is essentially a danger to Russia.

## What Basis for a New European Security Order?

Current disagreements over policy are compounded by the lack of a common understanding of basic norms that should underpin European security. One challenge facing the region consists of individual countries viewing each other as a threat, as outlined above. Moreover, while differences in the interpretation of key principles in the Helsinki Final Act are not new, they now complicate any attempt to rethink the European security order in the current context of rising tensions in the region. The «Astana Commemorative Declaration towards a Security Community» adopted at the OSCE summit in 2010 attempted to give a new lease of life to this set of common security principles, unfortunately to little avail.



For instance, the question of what constitutes legitimate security interests remains unanswered, and, as discussed above, an underlying issue in the debate about NATO's eastern expansion. Non-interference in internal affairs and aggression are other principles that lack a shared understanding at this point. These disagreements mirror debates in other forums, not least at the United Nations in the context of discussions about the responsibility to protect, and should also be understood in this larger context of global politics.

Given the absence of a shared discourse about the past, rising populism in the region (see Section 3) and conflicting narratives to explain the weakening of the European security order, the prospects for resetting the current order, along with a revised and mutually accepted set of norms and principles, are dim. Such proposals have been formulated, for example, in the 2015 report by the Panel of Eminent Persons under the auspices of the OSCE. So far, little progress has been made. This deadlock reveals an important weakness in the existing European security order: it is predicated on the idea that new security relations in Europe were possible as the Cold War ended, but no thinking went into what would happen if this new post-Cold War security order was ever challenged. The Budapest Memorandum (see above) vividly illustrates the shortcomings of international security arrangements that offer no protections against violations by signatories.

Perhaps a more practical approach, such as the effort to clarify and agree basic confidence-building measures in the context of the OSCE, might deliver a modicum of trust. However, as the United States disengages from Europe, hope for an improved security situation will remain faint until Russia changes course. Given Vladimir Putin's surge in popularity against the backdrop of conflict in eastern Ukraine and the Kremlin's tough anti-Western and anti-NATO rhetoric, there is at present little hope for significant change. It may come in the next few years when low oil prices and the lack of economic reform take their toll on the Russian economy. But whenever it happens, it will be important for the West to offer a vision for a new European order that can help to make Russia a full participant in Europe's security.

## 4 Eastern Ukraine: Looking for Peace in Europe

The situation in eastern Ukraine is a grim illustration of the continent's deteriorating security order and lack of consensus over values and principles that could underpin the region's common European future. The war in Ukraine also exemplifies the clash between the competing narratives discussed in the previous section: on the one hand, the right of sovereign nations in the region to conduct freely their foreign relations and, on the other, Russia's claim to protect what it regards as its legitimate security and political interests. This section includes topics related to Donbas that were selected for discussion during the Quadrilogue. It does not purport to be a comprehensive discussion of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Rather, these topics focus on the impact of conflict on civil society: on the media landscape (a topic that was the subject of a separate research paper), on internally displaced people and in relation to the blockade of Donbas.

### Background to the Conflict

Shortly after the overthrow of Ukrainian president Yanukovich, Russia annexed Crimea and backed separatists in the Donbas region. They proclaimed the «People's Republics of Luhansk» («LNR») and Donetsk («DNR»), resulting in conflict with government security forces. After months of intense fighting and thousands of casualties, the Minsk peace process (under the «Normandy Format», which includes France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia) produced two agreements in October 2014 and February 2015. The first agreement, known as Minsk I, collapsed shortly after its conclusion, leading to intense fighting in January and February of 2015. Minsk II, signed on 12 February 2015, drew from Minsk I and laid out a roadmap for a ceasefire and reintegration of the disputed regions into Ukraine. Minsk II has essentially frozen the situation on the ground along the 500 km Line of Contact (LoC), while partial ceasefires have been agreed in Normandy Format meetings. However, no complete ceasefire along the LoC has ever been achieved. As for other aspects of the agreement – the withdrawal and cantonment of heavy weapons, agreement on procedures for local elections, the restoration of Ukrainian control at the Russian-Ukrainian border, hostage and prisoner exchanges, and the provision of humanitarian assistance – little progress has been achieved.

Prospects for a successful implementation of the Minsk II agreement are dim. Kyiv is unhappy with many of the provisions for autonomy in the Donbas region, seeing them as legitimising Russian actions in Ukraine. The Ukrainian government also feels they were extracted at a time when Ukraine and its military were at their weakest. Consequently, Kyiv has dragged its feet on implementing key aspects of the agreement. Moscow, in turn, sees the Minsk process as a means to keep a hold on Ukraine, continue to exert influence over its politics and weaken President Poroshenko and his government. Taking advantage of Kyiv's lack of compliance with the political provisions of the Minsk II agreement, the

Kremlin has also selectively complied with the agreement. It is likely that Russia will continue to pursue its current policy on Ukraine at least until the next presidential elections in Ukraine (2019), and will keep its leverage in Donbas intact in order to be able to influence Ukrainian politics at a later stage.

## The Media Landscape in Eastern Ukraine

The media landscape in the Donbas region is characterised by fragmentation, isolation and factionalism. The media offering in eastern Ukraine is large, but every type of media available in the region (e.g. print, TV, online) faces challenges in reaching people beyond its core audience. Some media outlets with broader coverage (such as Ukrainian national television channels and national newspapers) either devote few resources to covering the conflict in Donbas or are not read in eastern Ukraine.

At the other end of the spectrum, municipal television channels, factory newspapers (a remnant of Soviet times) and city-based radio stations have a clear advantage over other sources of information because of their closeness to their communities. They are, however, far from being objective in their coverage of events. Private media outlets are generally owned by local or regional powerbrokers and business people and follow a corresponding editorial line. Russian channels, more easily available in separatist-controlled areas or near the LoC, are watched more for their entertainment value than for their coverage of the region's news, which is considerably one-sided.

Online media is more dynamic and accessible, but here too the virtual landscape is fractured between different news websites targeting specific locations and communities in Donbas. These outlets support particular political views with the help of partial moderators. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are also used widely, but as witnessed elsewhere they tend to reinforce the views of their users by creating online clusters of like-minded people. In effect, there is no real independent media outlet in eastern Ukraine that could serve as a provider of independent news about and for the entire region, either in Ukrainian or Russian (or both). This deeply fragmented media landscape perpetuates and intensifies the divisions that the conflict has already created.

## Eastern Ukraine's Internally Displaced Persons

Another extremely serious humanitarian challenge and, rather counter-intuitively, political opportunity is the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Over two million people have left the war-stricken region over the past three years, and most of them have chosen not to relocate closer to Ukraine's economic hubs. Instead, many IDPs have moved within the area familiar to them and stayed in government-controlled parts of the Donetsk and

Luhansk regions. One important factor is that about 70 per cent of the population have never lived outside Donbas (a fact that also helps to account for the population's relative conservatism and mistrust of the government in Kyiv).

The influx of IDPs to western Donbas has led to two developments. First, the situation has put overwhelming financial pressure on local authorities. Social benefit payments dramatically increased along with unemployment rates in both areas. Second, a majority of IDPs living in government-held areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions maintain contact with relatives who remained in the areas run by separatists. This situation provides a critical grassroots channel of information and communication between both sides.

IDPs are a potentially helpful constituency for local authorities and the Ukrainian government. They identify themselves strongly with Ukraine (which is why they left separatist areas for government-held areas instead of Russia) and are a tight-knit, often politically militant group that can be turned into a political force. There are nonetheless significant obstacles to IDPs becoming full participants in the political life of their new areas. Although IDPs can vote in national elections, they are not allowed to participate in local elections. The government justifies restricting their voting rights by arguing that IDPs should vote in their towns of origin once they return (as provided for by the Minsk II agreement). Although this made sense during the first months of the conflict, today more than two million people are deprived of the right to participate in local politics in the areas where they are displaced. The only way for IDPs to vote where they are displaced is to give up their displaced status, which means losing related social benefits. In effect, there is no reason for the Ukrainian government to make it easier for IDPs to change their status given the electoral weight they would carry in potential future local elections in territories currently held by separatists.

## The 2017 Blockade of Donbas

An economic blockade of these territories was initiated by civil society organisations with ties to Ukrainian volunteer battalions in early 2017. The blockade, which was particularly relevant to discussions among Quadrilogue participants, targeted business relations and trade between separatist-controlled parts of Donbas and Ukrainian-controlled territory, in particular in the coal industry. As the slogan of the blockade was «Stop Financing Separatists», sanctions rapidly gained broad popular support in Ukraine.

Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko had a difficult decision to make. He could publicly denounce the boycott as economically and politically harmful for Ukraine – a position that may have required the use of force to remove volunteer units blocking access to Donbas. Alternatively, he could support the blockade tacitly with the risk of provoking a bigger political crisis. In light of his fragile parliamentary coalition and the rapidly decreasing

popularity of his government, the president opted for the latter: to support the blockade and justify it as a step to counter the recent decisions taken by the «DNR» and «LNR» to seize ownership of public companies in Donbas.

At the same time, separatists have used the blockade as an opportunity to increase their already dominant economic position in the area. The last remaining private companies – mostly big chemical and energy plants belonging to Ukrainian corporations – were confiscated (or their ownership transferred) in the separatist-controlled regions, with over 30,000 employees affected. Significant economic ties between the separatist-controlled Donbas and other parts of Ukraine were broken off. On the other hand, economic ties between separatist-controlled regions and Russia increased even more.

As the level of separation between government-run parts of Donbas and those controlled by separatists grows, challenges abound for local authorities and local civil society organisations. Several years of war have badly damaged local infrastructure: key facilities such as power plants, petrol stations, roads and pipelines. Many cannot be accessed for repair as they are located directly at the LoC. Some towns near the LoC lack water; others are not supplied with gas, affecting heating in winter. Public services provision has suffered through newly-created separation lines, and access to justice is limited because of the disruption caused by the conflict. Administrative hassle has increased because of the creation of new administrative entities.

Ukraine's international backers fear that separatists will use the blockade of the region politically and economically in order to tie the region to Russia. Early indications confirm these fears: Russia has started to recognise official documents (such as university degrees and licence plates) and travel documents issued by the «LNR» and «DNR». For the Ukrainian government, the chances of Donbas being returned to Kyiv's control by diplomatic means or through the Minsk process are close to non-existent. There is, in effect, not much to lose that has not been lost already. The only way the territories could be returned, the argument goes, is through coercion. A long-term war of exhaustion that strangles the economy is seen as a way to weaken separatists and their backers and force them to give up.

Human security is grounded in the idea that the protection of life, safety and the rights of individuals should be given first priority. When this idea is pursued, individuals and communities are able to be active participants in designing strategies to strengthen their own security. In the case of Donbas, a human security approach offers hope for progress through the strength of civil society. IDP communities remain involved in the area and are able to communicate across the LoC. The blockade of the separatist-controlled territories was in effect the product of civil society organisations on the Ukrainian side. Whereas a political resolution or a hypothetical victory in a war of exhaustion are unlikely in the short

term, finding pragmatic ways to enhance human security in Donbas by harnessing the power of civil society may be more promising.

# 5 What Values for a Common European Future?

This section considers what kind of values should underpin the European security order. Given the current wave of populism sweeping the continent, this discussion becomes all the more important. Two key issues are tackled here: how the past has been dealt with in the region since the late 1980s and what this means for contemporary political discourse and politics; and how populist narratives in the region are complicating the restoration of the European security order by fostering tensions within and between societies.

## Dealing with the Region's Past

As communism fell in Europe at the end of the 1980s, no formal de-Sovietisation (or de-communisation) process was put in place. There is, therefore, no shared discourse in the region about the post-1945 period. This situation has allowed for contemporary reinterpretations of – and even a return to – attitudes and practices that were in place at the time of the Soviet Union (Russia being a case in point). Another consequence of the absence of a shared discourse across the region about the period from 1945 to 1991 is that there is no common narrative about how key decisions were made, on what basis and by whom. It is therefore extremely difficult to gauge how contemporary governance measures up against past systems of government. This setting has led to a lack of overall direction in political transition and reform, which in turn has led to mixed public support and low accountability, not least by international donors who often have little understanding of the local context and operate at cross-purposes. This mix of public disaffection, poor accountability and lack of a unifying narrative has created opportunities that populist politicians have astutely exploited.

In Russia, many elements of the Soviet system of governance have been restored – a process sometimes called re-Sovietisation. Public institutions, including the judiciary, lack independence, and political interference in their day-to-day operations is rife. A neo-nomenklatura, comprising a group of individuals in positions of influence who are loyal to the Kremlin, has also emerged in recent years. Membership of the neo-nomenklatura provides benefits (not least influence) to these individuals in addition to the compensation they receive as employees of their respective institutions. Importantly, these benefits are attached to the office, but remain the property of the state. The state (or rather, those controlling it) determines who can enjoy these benefits and, crucially, from whom they are taken away.

Confrontation with the West can also be seen through the prism of domestic politics. Constructing an anti-Western narrative has allowed the Kremlin to justify repression against recalcitrant groups at home and to consolidate power around the Kremlin. Russia's patriotic fight against fascism, a popular theme in the Soviet era, has been revived by the

current regime, and is likely to continue to be used to legitimise foreign policy decisions. Unsurprisingly, young Russians who grew up under Vladimir Putin (perhaps with the exception of 16–20-year-olds, who tend to be more anti-Kremlin) lean towards supporting re-Sovietisation, not least because they have no experience of the Soviet Union.

Turning to Ukraine, de-Sovietisation there consisted mostly in the removal of Soviet symbols (which was criticised as a kind of political iconoclasm). As during Soviet times, strategic decisions continue to be based more on informal deals among oligarchic groups and less on formal procedures inside state institutions, which merely function as administrative centres tasked only with implementing these deals. Accountability and good governance remain elusive. The idea of re-Sovietisation, however, is perceived negatively in Ukraine, not least because it is seen as a cover for Russian imperialism. In fact, many Ukrainians are suspicious of the state, prefer weak institutions and self-organise in order to provide services that normally would be under the government's purview.

The situation in Donbas and Crimea is, however, different. There, public institutions have sought to bolster their legitimacy by serving paternalistic expectations in society, though it should be noted that Kyiv has more often than not struggled to govern both areas. Many years after the collapse of the Soviet Union there were no real competitive elections to speak of, and no real freedom of the media. Candidates preselected by local power holders were elected with comfortable majorities in ballots reminiscent of Soviet elections. In fact, the kind of transition that the rest of Ukraine experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union has not taken place in Donbas and Crimea at all.

As for Poland, de-communisation was articulated around two main, forward-looking priorities: first, to establish a democracy supported by civil society and a free-market economy at home; second, to join NATO and the EU. There was, however, no violent revolution that led to the fall of communism in 1989. De-communisation took the form of institutional changes strengthened by the rule of law, the introduction of local self-management, the creation of public radio and television, and the privatisation of most of the state-owned, largely bankrupt enterprises; it was supplemented by far-reaching personnel changes. «Lustration» basically concentrated on officers and agents of the communist secret police. As a result, former members of the Polish United Workers Party loyally participated in the democratic reforms. All post-1989 liberal, rightist and leftist governments and presidents, including Aleksander Kwaśniewski, implemented similar policies that led Poland on the path to successful economic development and membership in NATO and the EU.

The radical right opposition of the Law and Justice (PiS) party argued for a clean break with the past, looking for communists where, after more than 25 years, there were none. All of the party's predecessors were therefore branded as post-communists. In 2015, the PiS was able to form a government and under the banner of de-communisation began a cultural counter-revolution combined with a massive top-down personnel purge.



Their victims were not former communists but rather all those who participated in the post-1989 reforms.

The PiS was looking for historical inspiration and identification that would be distinct from all others. It found them not in the World War II «underground Polish state» and its Home Army or in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising but in the «cursed soldiers» (resistance movements that fought the Soviets and communists during and after the war). Today, those who criticise their actions (e.g. they are alleged to have committed massacres against civilians, particularly against Jews, Ukrainians and Belarusians) are branded as supporters of communists or even descendants of communists who hunted down cursed soldiers.

## Contemporary Political Discourse and Populism in the Region

Support for populism in the region, as elsewhere, is often interpreted as a consequence of increasing economic inequality and globalisation, and of declining living standards for large sections of society (often referred to as the «left-behinds»). However, this economic argument does not adequately explain the rise of populism: it does not account, for instance, for the Law and Justice party's victory in Poland's 2015 elections. Although there may be significant differences between populist movements in the region, one feature is common to all: populism encourages deep divisions in society on the basis of narratives about identity and security. Crucially, these narratives are underpinned by a sense that outsiders – essentially, foreigners – pose a risk. Such a viewpoint, unfortunately, can only complicate any attempt to renew the European security order.

Populists frequently romanticise the past and try to rebuild their version of history in the future. Moreover, because there is no shared narrative about the post-1945 period in the countries of the region, populist visions for the future take on different forms. In Poland, for instance, populism is feeding off a socio-cultural backlash against secularisation, minority rights, marriage and gender equality, and multiculturalism, which many people see in the context of the influx of Muslim refugees and economic migrants into Europe.

Several factors significantly facilitated this reversal. Rapid social change helped to galvanise more conservative voices in Polish society against liberalisation (also described as «Europeanisation»), and the 2010 Smolensk plane crash disaster became a catalyst for reinventing the Polish nationalism and a sense of victimhood. A cocktail of welfarism and nativism, together with the weakness of the opposition, gave the PiS an electoral victory. It could form a government only because the left did not manage to gain seats in the Parliament at all for the first time since 1989. The question of whether the social transformation initiated by EU membership has been too sudden for many also merits careful consideration. For instance, has freedom of movement (a central tenet of EU membership), supplemented by widespread opposition against the influx of refugees and economic migrants

from the Middle East and Africa, and against the EU policy of imposed quotas, generated anxieties about loss of identity rather than fostered understanding and tolerance?

The PiS has been spreading pro-government propaganda by using public radio and television under its control. The growth of social media in Poland also contributed to sections of the electorate becoming immune to facts and encouraged them to embrace identity-based post-truth politics. By giving a voice to conspiracy theories and removing the need for fact-checking, social media has been a great enabler of post-truth politics in Poland (and beyond). Moreover, social media also affects the public by creating a sense of urgency and emotional instantaneity, which in turn influences public figures in Poland who feel they need to show their relevance not only by being active online but also by radicalising their policies.

Issues without any basis in fact enter the political arena much more easily and further increase the public's exposure to populist narratives. Ironically, where mass media had previously been used to spread a more progressive democratic discourse, the opposite is now happening in Poland. Nevertheless, in spite of control over public digital media and massive propaganda on social media, Poland still enjoys a mature and pluralistic media market that allows a diverse range of information and views to reach the public.

In addition, one should note that pro-European attitudes are shared by up to 80 per cent of the population. There is also widespread opposition to the PiS-led cultural counter-revolution, particularly among women who are actively fighting plans to introduce one of the world's most restrictive abortion laws in Poland.

In Russia, populism has been a constant feature of the political discourse since the end of the Soviet Union. Boris Yeltsin adopted a pro-Western, anti-Soviet brand of populism, whereas under Vladimir Putin the pendulum has swung back to reinstating parts of Russia's Soviet heritage. It is important to note that sympathy for populist narratives in Russia takes on a generational dimension: a growing majority of 16–20-year-olds shows signs of opposing the Kremlin's discourse, whereas 20–35-year-olds are more supportive of it. With respect to Vladimir Putin's core supporters from the early 2000s, an aging but still crucial share of his political base, their support continues to be driven by social and economic insecurities, and a perception that Russia's existence and prestige in the world is under threat. Against this backdrop, Vladimir Putin's popularity has benefited significantly from his willingness to stand up to NATO's perceived aggressiveness and from the Kremlin's policy on Ukraine.

Despite Warsaw's antagonistic view of Moscow, similar conservative themes are part of today's political discourse in both countries. This similarity in themes raises the question of whether Russia plays an active role in spreading populist narratives that appeal to societies in other countries (as in Poland), or whether contemporary political discourse in Russia is

part of a broader trend towards populism in the region and beyond. Moscow's security concerns point to a possible Russian interest in a Europe-wide populist wave. The more post-communist countries (such as Poland and Ukraine) can be influenced to embrace authoritarianism and populism, the more uncertain (and perhaps even undesirable) any transition towards Western-style democracy will be. The EU and NATO, long regarded as threats by the Kremlin, would be undermined as a result; meanwhile, policy in countries embracing populism could become more amicable towards Russian interests (see Section 1). Crucially, the rise of populism and regional security cannot be viewed as separate issues.

In Ukraine, one could make the case that political and economic instability, and insecurities emerging from conflict, could actually facilitate the rise of populist figures promising security and more generous welfare policies. It has in fact been suggested that the country could be immune to populist politics for several reasons. First, Ukrainians do not take their security or the existence of their state for granted. Because of this sense of instability and fragility, they do not feel they can take a chance at the ballot box by voting for disruptive political figures. Second, Poland and the United States, long regarded as models of democracy by Ukrainians (and by the young in particular), have been losing their appeal because of their recent embrace of populism. Third, because Ukrainian identity is more plural, diverse and based on a conscious personal choice, the kind of identity-based and nationalist populism found elsewhere in the region resonates less with the public.

## 6 Conclusion: The Need for Shared Narratives to Bolster European Security

The analysis presented in this report points to deep-seated and adversarial narratives at the political level as a byproduct of tensions and, in the case of Russia and Ukraine, conflict in the region. These narratives have been able to flourish in great part because of a lack of a shared understanding about the past. Because these diametrically opposed political narratives still exist, when they are (re-)used in contemporary political discourse to underpin a populist vision, they almost invariably generate antagonism and conflict within and between societies.

Europe's security order is in dire need of repair. Even if participants agreed that the continent's security architecture should continue to be grounded in the Helsinki Final Act, the reality is that there is currently little to no agreement on basic principles that could, at the very least, allow for disputes to be managed. Even defining security threats will remain a challenge as long as the four countries view security threats as coming from within the region.

Finally, the case of Donbas is a sad reminder that neglect of international law, aggressive political narratives and a deteriorating security order in Europe have disastrous consequences for people all over Europe. The human, social and economic cost of the war in eastern Ukraine illustrates the urgent need for putting human security at the centre of political dialogue.

What could be the basis for such a dialogue? Several avenues may be worth exploring. A discussion of how to revive the European security order on the basis of the Helsinki principles would be an obvious starting point. It is unclear, however, whether there is much political appetite to begin such a perilous exercise without some assurance that there is enough political will on the continent to see it through and that there is no expectation that prior violations (such as the violation of the Budapest Memorandum) will need to be accepted as a precondition for discussion. Another option would be to try to define a package of security measures and other confidence-building measures with the (more modest) aim to better manage and de-escalate tensions between Russia and the West. This option could be pursued within the OSCE framework, as attempted by former German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier with his structured dialogue initiative.

Another approach could consist of offering Moscow a more comprehensive set of topics for negotiation, for example on EU/EEU economic cooperation and climate change, in the hope of making it easier to find some common ground with Moscow. This approach may be problematic for other countries because it would open the door to de-escalation and a degree of normalisation in relations with Russia without assurances that the Minsk

agreement will be implemented and other security threats emanating from the Kremlin tackled. Such an offer also assumes that countries in the region are interested in such a joint agenda for talks, which may not be the case for Russia and Ukraine. A relatively more promising option may be to take human security as a basis for discussion. States could explore whether common ground can be found in order to improve the security of individuals and communities in the region and in eastern Ukraine in particular. While the broader conflict is unlikely to be addressed in the short to medium term, tackling pragmatic issues as a way to improve the lives of those caught up in the fighting may bring some measure of relief.

## 7 Participants of the Quadrilogue Discussion Process\*

- Georgiy Chizhov, Reforms Support Center, Kyiv
- Boris Dolgin, Allrussian Civil Forum, Moscow
- Maria Fihl, Nationcraft, Brussels
- Sabine Fischer, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin
- Vladimir Frolov, Leff Group, Moscow
- Evgeny Gontmakher, «European dialogue» Expert Group, Moscow
- Magdalena Grono, International Crisis Group, Brussels
- Irene Hahn-Fuhr, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Warsaw
- Yevhen Hlibovytsky, Nestor Group, Kyiv
- Wilfried Jilge, German Council on Foreign Relations, Berlin
- Vadim Karastelev, Moscow Helsinki Group, Moscow
- Walter Kaufmann, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Berlin
- Jacek Kucharczyk, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw
- Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, Stefan Batory Foundation, Warsaw
- Janusz Onyszkiewicz, European Leadership Network, Warsaw
- Dominique Orsini, Political Edge Consultancy, Brussels
- Tatyana Parkhalina, Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow
- Andrei Petrov, «European dialogue» Expert Group, Moscow
- Nikolay Petrov, Carnegie Moscow Centre, Moscow
- Oleh Rybachuk, Centre UA, Kyiv
- Ihor Semivolos, Association of Middle East Studies / Ukrainian Peace-building School, Kyiv
- Hanna Shelest, Ukraine Analytica, Kyiv
- Eugeniusz Smolar, Centre for International Relations, Warsaw
- Sergej Sumlenny, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Kyiv

- Oleksandr Sushko, Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation, Kyiv
- Andreas Umland, Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation, Kyiv
- Johannes Voswinkel, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Moscow
- Łukasz Wenerski, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw
- Volodymyr Yermolenko, Internews Ukraine / European Projects, Kyiv

\* None of the participants bears any responsibility for the text of the report.

# The Author

**Dominique Orsini** (Brussels) is an international relations expert. He specialises in conflict analysis, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.

# Imprint

Editor: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V., Schumannstraße 8, 10117 Berlin

Contact: Walter Kaufmann, Referat East and South East Europe **E** [kaufmann@boell.de](mailto:kaufmann@boell.de)

Place of publication: [www.boell.de](http://www.boell.de)

Release date: June 2018

Licence: Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

You can find other E-Books here:

[www.boell.de/en/publications](http://www.boell.de/en/publications)