

Arkady Moshes, Programme Director, FIIA

THE NORMANDY SUMMIT ON UKRAINE

NO WINNERS, NO LOSERS, TO BE CONTINUED

The French-German-Russian-Ukrainian top-level encounter could not and did not deliver a prospect of resolving the conflict in Donbas, but the limits of the possible are now clearer. No certainty, but the “draw” may push the parties closer to a sustainable ceasefire.

In 2019, Russia’s European diplomacy went from one achievement to another. In June, Russia was invited to return to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the voting rights in which it had lost in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea. In August, French President Emmanuel Macron started his advocacy campaign for re-engagement with Russia. By December, the last remaining obstacles on the way to completing the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline had been removed. In view of these developments, statements that the crisis over Ukraine still has a significant impact on European-Russian relations no longer sounded completely credible.

Meanwhile, Ukraine’s new president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, appeared to apportion more blame for the continuation of the conflict in Donbas on Ukraine’s own previous leadership and, out of naiveté or self-confidence, seemed to believe that he would be able to negotiate with Moscow more efficiently. He wanted to have a summit with Russia’s leader Vladimir Putin so much that Ukraine made several important concessions simply in order to secure the meeting. Since taking up office, Zelenskiy has totally excluded any direct mention of “Russian aggression” from his pronouncements concerning Donbas.

This is the context in which the French-German-Russian-Ukrain-

ian summit, known as the Normandy Four, took place in Paris on December 9. The Kremlin had grounds for hoping that one more success was within reach. Since “peace”, in abstract terms, is popular in Ukraine, an agreement could boost Zelenskiy’s falling domestic ratings. And since preserving European unity around the issue of economic sanctions on Russia has never been easy for Berlin and Paris, they, too, might be getting ready for a deal. At the same time, for Moscow, the burden of the conflict in Donbas did not look too heavy and the Kremlin was not under any immediate pressure to find a compromise.

The meeting, however, did not advance Russian positions. If sports

terminology is at all appropriate when talking about human lives, one could agree with Volodymyr Zelenskiy that the summit ended in a “draw”.

The key contradictions were not mitigated in any way. Moscow insists, following the text of the Minsk agreements of 2015, that Ukraine can only gain back control over its eastern border after the special status of the breakaway entities becomes part of the country’s constitution and a reality on the ground. Kyiv replies that control over the border is a precondition for a political settlement, and that the constitutional amendments are not forthcoming.

The announced results are meagre. Another prisoner exchange could have been agreed bilaterally, as happened last summer but also several years ago under President Petro Poroshenko. A plan to – finally – establish a ceasefire and to guarantee the OSCE mission unrestricted access to the whole area of conflict is yet to be implemented and may still unravel. Progress in Russian-Ukrainian gas negotiations, reportedly reached during a side meeting too, still needs to be converted into contracts.

Two observations might help in explaining why Zelenskiy, contrary to signals sent by his administration

before the summit, in the end chose – and was able – to demonstrate firmness during the meeting. One is the campaign against “capitulation” inside Ukraine. For several months, day and night, prominent representatives of civil society, the media and national-oriented political parties were warning the president against the negative implications of a would-be soft stance. This campaign had an impact on the timbre of public opinion, which even beforehand was sceptical towards constitutional changes, and especially the amnesty for separatists involved in crimes. This is something Ukraine’s president could not ignore. It is quite telling that Ukraine’s Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, in his position since 2014 and as such a symbol of policy continuity, decided to go public with the statement “Betrayal there wasn’t” to quality-stamp the president’s behaviour in the eyes of national-minded citizens.

The other observation is the evident lack of European pressure on Zelenskiy, which was so feared before the summit. Presumably, Berlin and Paris are now cognizant of the fact that the price of Zelenskiy’s concessions could be deep destabilization in Ukraine, which, taking into account the presence of hundreds of thousands of recent

frontline soldiers, would be much more difficult to contain than the conflict in Donbas.

The question now arises as to whether Moscow will take Ukraine’s “No” for an answer. One should not be surprised if it will not. On the day of the summit, three Ukrainian soldiers died in the zone of conflict, an ominous reminder that escalation can happen at any moment. And just hours after the Normandy summit, Ukraine’s Prime Minister Olexiy Goncharuk said that another “gas war” with Russia was possible. But it is also possible, albeit against the odds, that Moscow will – in the calculus that it can gain more from the above-mentioned attempt by Macron to reset relations and from putting the crisis over Ukraine on the back burner. This would still not be encouraging news for Ukraine from the point of view of restoring its territorial integrity, but it would give it a better chance to concentrate on the much-needed domestic reforms.