

# The Minsk Process: Societal Perceptions and Narratives

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## *Abstract*

The official negotiation process to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the “Minsk Process”, has been ongoing since 2014, with very little tangible success. Based on interviews conducted with persons living in different regions of Ukraine and Russia, this paper examines positions on the Minsk Process held by those most immediately affected by the crisis. Focusing on the restoration of Ukrainian statehood in the non-government-controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as a key issue in the conflict, the paper identifies two main positions: “border first” and “status first”. Exploring the needs and fears that underlie these positions enables us to identify shared interests and creates space for the development of mutually acceptable solutions.

## *Keywords*

OSCE, Ukraine conflict, Donbas, Minsk Process, societal perceptions, shared interests

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

For the past six years, the official process to settle the conflict in the Donbas area of eastern Ukraine, known as the “Minsk

Process”, has aimed to implement the provisions of the so-called “Minsk agreements” designed to restore peace and security in eastern Ukraine. This goal has remained elusive. At the core of the problem is the fact that diverging positions on key provisions of the agreements, for example on restoring Ukrainian statehood in eastern Ukraine, are held not only by officials at the Minsk talks but also at the societal level, in all areas affected by the conflict.

This paper aims to identify these diverse societal positions and to explore the interests, needs, and fears that underlie them. In our analysis, we do not take a stand on who is responsible for the war or which political positions are most con-

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ducive to ending it. Rather, we see our role as that of discussing how the official peace process and its key provisions are perceived by members of society on all sides, and searching for common interests that could contribute to unblocking the road to sustainable peace.

The paper is based on the study “The Minsk Process as Perceived from Within”, which was conceptualized and conducted by Ukrainian, Russian, and Swiss researchers<sup>2</sup> from 2017 to 2020 within the framework of the transnational dialogue platform Women’s Initiatives for Peace in Donbas (WIPD).<sup>3</sup> The study examined perceptions of the Minsk process in different regions of Ukraine, including the non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs) of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and in Russia.<sup>4</sup> Following the WIPD’s approach of combining dialogue and practical cooperation, sometimes referred to as “diapraxis”,<sup>5</sup> the study was conducted as a research dialogue, in which results were elaborated in constant exchange among researchers representing different sides to the conflict.

The initial aim of the study was to introduce positions on the Minsk Process held by members of society into the official negotiations, based on the premise that their exclusion might lead to blind spots in a future agreement, thus creating problems for its implementation. Our preliminary findings challenged this assumption. They showed that societal perceptions of the key provisions of the Minsk agreements, although excluded from the official discourse, by and large reflect the diverging positions that have led to stalemates in the negotiations. This

insight inspired us to reorient our study: we sought rather to analyse the interests that underlie these societal perceptions with a view to discovering areas where they converge. Such an analysis creates space for the generation of options potentially acceptable to all, which can be useful not only for the official peace process but also for multitrack peacemaking initiatives.

In this paper, we focus on one of the key points of contention in the Minsk Process, which also emerged as one of the most controversial questions among those interviewed in our study: the restoration of Ukrainian statehood in eastern Ukraine. We identified two main narratives in this regard, which we dubbed “border first” and “status first” narratives. The exploration of the interests underlying these opposing narratives revealed a number of needs and fears shared by the respondents representing the different sides. The most prominent, especially among respondents from areas in the immediate vicinity of the conflict, were de-militarization and physical security, socio-economic survival and mobility, and political participation. Our analysis shows that between the moderate positions within the two main narratives there is potential space for exploring mutually acceptable solutions.

## Methodology

Our study examined the positions and interests of those interviewed through a conceptual lens inspired by the Harvard method of interest-based negotiations. A

key principle of the Harvard method is that parties to a conflict and their positions are separate from the interests that underlie them. Accordingly, understanding parties' interests, needs, and fears increases the chances of generating options that are conducive to a mutually acceptable solution.<sup>6</sup>

Data was collected from 144 qualitative interviews conducted between 2018 and 2019, covering all geographic regions impacted by the conflict in Donbas. These include the government-controlled areas (GCAs) of Ukraine (in the central, western, eastern, and southern parts of the country), the NGCAs (in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions), and Russia (the border region with Ukraine and the central/northern parts of Russia). In addition, interviews were conducted with persons in two non-geographic categories: internally displaced persons from Donbas in Ukraine and Donbas refugees in Russia. The latter group proved to be a valuable source, as the positions held by Donbas refugees in Russia often reflect the opinions of NGCA inhabitants more openly. The study did not aim to collect quantitative information or to reconstruct proportions. Rather, it focused on analysing narratives. These narratives were deduced from thematically coded interviews and then compared among groups of respondents, which were labelled with geographic and demographic codes. The study was not focused on any particular social group and was based on voluntary participation. Perhaps as a result of this selection based on motivation, around two thirds of the respondents had a higher education, most of them were

between 35 and 55 years old, and women were slightly overrepresented compared to men (57 per cent).

## Background

Since its inception in 2014, the conflict in eastern Ukraine has claimed over 13,000 lives.<sup>7</sup> Ukraine is now home to around 1.5 million internally displaced persons,<sup>8</sup> and at least one million refugees have left Donbas for Russia.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the high-intensity conflict, Ukraine has lost control over its state border with Russia and parts of Donbas, the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.<sup>10</sup> A 472-kilometre contact line divides the region into GCAs and NGCAs.<sup>11</sup> The conflict has not only eroded Ukraine's state sovereignty but also caused major infrastructural damage, resulting in a crumbling economy and an affected population living in dire humanitarian conditions. The security situation along the contact line remains volatile. The fault lines do not adhere to geographical and ideological boundaries, instead running straight through the heart of societies, with family members and friends often finding themselves in different camps.

International efforts to deal with the conflict in eastern Ukraine were launched in 2014, but the violence did not begin to abate until the end of 2016/early 2017. What is commonly referred to as the "Minsk agreements" are three documents from September 2014 (the Minsk Protocol and the Minsk Memorandum) and February 2015 (the Package

of Measures on the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements), signed by Russia, Ukraine, and representatives of the NGCAs, under the auspices of the four heads of state or government of the “Normandy Format” (Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine). The agreements serve as the basis for talks within the OSCE Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) and its four thematic working groups.<sup>12</sup> The Minsk Process and notably the TCG is the only format that brings together all parties to the conflict at the official level. Six years after the signing of the agreements and biweekly meetings in Minsk, however, there is no comprehensive and sustainable ceasefire and no political solution in place. One of the key obstacles to the implementation of the Minsk agreements remains the issue of sequencing their political and security provisions. Other factors that have hampered implementation include procedural non-transparency and the contested political and military role of Russia.

### **Restoring Ukrainian statehood: From diverging positions to converging interests?**

As mentioned above, restoring Ukrainian statehood in eastern Ukraine is a main

point of contention in the Minsk Process. While the Ukrainian government insists on restoring control over its border with Russia before any decisions can be made about the status of the NGCAs, the latter, backed by Russia, demand autonomy and security guarantees before a possible reintegration of the territories into Ukrainian territory can be discussed. At face value, the diverging narratives identified in our study, ranging from a “border first” to a “status first” approach, reflect the official positions that have led to the current stalemate. However, our analysis shows that the respondents’ attitudes reflect a broad spectrum of positions. Between the extremes of “hard reintegration” and “full independence”, they also hold more moderate attitudes that can be engaged with to generate mutually acceptable outcomes.

This spectrum of narratives is presented in the following subsections, followed by a summary of the relevant needs and fears that underlie them and the reactions they have provoked. Table 1 provides an overview.

Table 1: Overview of narratives and positions

Narrative	Position	Underlying fears/interests	Shared by (group of respondents)
<p><b>Narrative I</b>  <b>“Border first”:</b>                      Restoration of Ukrainian control is required in the first instance</p>	<p><b>Position 1</b>                      “Hard reintegration and restoration of status quo ante”</p>	<p><b>Fear:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• creeping Russification of Ukraine</li> </ul> <p><b>Interest:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• status quo ante (Ukraine, including Donbas and Crimea)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ukraine (mainly southern and central parts)</li> <li>• Russia (central part)</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Position 2</b>                      “Territorial integrity and national interest”</p>	<p><b>Fear:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• special status of the NGCA as a threat to the Ukrainian state (territorial fragmentation)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ukraine (all parts)</li> <li>• Russia (all parts)</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Position 3</b>                      “Soft reintegration and restoration of statehood”</p>	<p><b>Interests:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• socio-economic survival</li> <li>• restoration of statehood and infrastructure in the conflict region</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ukraine, areas close to the conflict zone (GCAs and NGCAs)</li> <li>• Russia (border region)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Narrative II</b>  <b>“Status first”:</b>                      Special status/ autonomy/ independence for the NGCAs is required in the first instance</p>	<p><b>Position 4</b>                      “Independence or unification with Russia”</p>	<p><b>Fears:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• isolation</li> <li>• “hard integration” as a humanitarian disaster for NGCA inhabitants</li> </ul> <p><b>Interest:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• human security of NGCAs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NGCAs</li> <li>• Donbas refugees in Russia</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Position 5</b>                      “Transitional autonomy and soft independence”</p>	<p><b>Interests:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• human security of NGCAs</li> <li>• restoration of statehood and infrastructure in the conflict region</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ukraine GCAs (all parts)</li> <li>• NGCAs</li> <li>• Russia (border region)</li> </ul>

## Narrative I: Reintegration and the “border first” perspective

The tension between the two main narratives, namely the “border first” and “status first” narratives, mirrors the challenge of sequencing the security and the political provisions of the Minsk agreements. “Border first” respondents believe that Ukraine must first restore its control over the border with Russia if there are to be further steps toward resolution.

### *Position 1: “Hard re-integration and restoration of the status quo ante”*

“I am not in favour of any special status for those regions [for the NGCAs], apart from the fact that these regions must be subject to strict discipline, surveillance, and order. In short, I want and believe it is fair and right for these regions to be punished.” (Central Ukraine)

Among the more radical positions within the “border first” narrative is the call for the “hard re-integration” of the NGCAs into Ukrainian territory, often coupled with a call for the restoration of the territorial *status quo ante* (including for Crimea). In military terms, these respondents view this “hard reintegration” as involving the restoration of full control over (and the total closure of) the border with Russia and a military takeover of the Donbas. In socio-cultural terms, this would mean the restoration of full control over and a “(re-)Ukrainization” of the population in the NGCAs, often

also reflecting a note of retribution (see quote above). The option of granting autonomy to the NGCAs based on the special status law, as discussed in the Minsk agreements, is categorically rejected by these respondents, who fear that “special status” would be used by Russia to exert pressure on Kyiv’s security and foreign policymaking through the political participation of Donbas authorities in Ukrainian politics.<sup>13</sup> In general, proponents of this position consider Russian aggression the main, if not the only, cause of the conflict in Donbas, viewing the popular motto “Russia out!” as a promise of salvation and the de-Russification of the Donbas as essential to peace. Interestingly, this “hard reintegration”, “Russia out!” position was expressed by respondents not only in southern and central Ukraine but also in Russia, most often in regions most remote from the zone of immediate conflict.

With its preference for a military solution and its ideological and highly emotional quality, the “hard reintegration” position stands in opposition especially with that of inhabitants of the NGCAs and Donbas refugees in Russia. It also diverges from the opinions held by respondents living close to the conflict zone in the government-controlled parts of Donbas and southern Russia, who argue that a military re-seizure of the Donbas would threaten the security and the economic development of the entire region.

This radical position would seem to be partly due to a lack of accurate information on the content and procedures of the Minsk Process. Several respondents from the GCAs, the NGCAs, the Donbas

refugee population, and Russia have indicated that they have little to no information on the peace process and that when they do get information, it is usually through informal channels, their trusted sources being bloggers and other influential elites. As a result, concepts such as “special status”, “federalism”, “autonomy”, and “amnesty” are associated with myths of territorial loss and creeping Russification. A lack of transparency and reliable information on the conceptual and operational modalities of these key concepts has led to the spread of fear and the hardening of positions.

***Position 2: “Territorial integrity and the national interest”***

“[restoring peace means] the achievement of complete control of Ukraine over the entire state border of Ukraine. I consider this to be absolutely necessary; each country has the right to sovereignty!” (Central Ukraine)

This position adheres to the “border first” narrative, but views the issue of reintegration from a legal and institutional, rather than an ideological, point of view. Proponents of this position believe that the NGCAs should be reincorporated and that border control should be restored due to the Ukrainian state’s right (and obligation) to exercise jurisdiction over its entire internationally recognized territory.

This position differs from the “hard reintegration” approach not only due

to its more sober content but also because it provokes less opposition. There is broad consensus among respondents from all groups, including inhabitants of the NGCAs and the even more radical refugees in southern Russia, that territorial integrity and an intact border regime with Russia are in principle positive because they are core conditions of a well-functioning Ukrainian statehood.

When we unpack the “territorial integrity and national interest” position and the more radical “hard reintegration” and “Russia out!” approach, it becomes clear that the main interest underlying both positions is the need for Ukrainian sovereignty and fear of Ukraine’s further territorial fragmentation. The fear of fragmenting Ukrainian state power goes hand in hand with indignation regarding Russia’s dominance. The call for a full Russian withdrawal and the reluctance to agree on local elections and on giving the NGCAs special status are also fuelled by fear of the increasing Russification of eastern Ukraine. Further, several respondents from southern Russia and Ukrainian-controlled Donbas have expressed their apprehension regarding the geo-politicization of the conflict, in particular Moscow’s use of the Donbas and notably the permeability of its border with Russia as an instrument for freezing and thawing the conflict, depending on Kyiv’s stance towards Moscow.

***Position 3: “Soft reintegration and the restoration of statehood”***

“[Ukrainian control of the state border means] the entry/exit control of normal citizens and visitors of the country. The same applies to the movement of goods. But they [i.e. the Minsk Protocols] do not mention this, they only mention that no supplies for the armed formations should be allowed to pass through...”  
(eastern Ukraine/Donbas GCAs)

Among the more moderate stances within the “border first” narrative is the “soft reintegration” position. In contrast to the more hard-line positions discussed above, it emphasizes not the control or closure of the border, but the restoration of borders that fulfil their normal functions, as part of the restoration and consolidation of Ukrainian statehood in the zones immediately affected by the conflict.

This stance accords with Johan Galtung’s notion of “positive peace” as involving stability beyond a purely military sense, where not only the imminent problems of (physical) security but also the root causes of conflict are addressed.<sup>14</sup> In particular, respondents from areas close to the conflict on the Ukrainian-controlled side and in southern Russia emphasized the importance of a “positive” state presence as a basis for successful reintegration in the future. In their eyes, this entails reinstatement of an intact legal system, a functioning socio-economic infrastructure, and the presence of administrative structures across Ukraine, including the NGCAs. On this view,

restoration of Ukraine’s control over the border entails control not only over weapons but also over the movement of persons and goods. This view was especially prevalent among respondents from areas close to the conflict zones (government-controlled Donbas, NGCAs, and southern Russia). For them, it is important that both the Russian–Ukrainian border and the internal Ukrainian line of contact be secure and favourable to mobility on both sides.

***Shared interests: Socio-economic survival and mobility***

The needs that underlie the restoration of statehood and “border first” approaches are linked to security, socio-economic survival, mobility, and access to a dignified livelihood. A large number of NGCA respondents also have a shared interest in “positive” peace and a people-focused solution to the problem of reintegration. They expressed tolerance or even support for the idea of reintegration on the condition that their security and socio-economic needs are met.

The restoration of a “positive” Ukrainian state presence across the Donbas region can be identified as a second area of common interest, shared by respondents from different groups on both sides of the border and the line of contact, which may open up possibilities for compromise.

## Narrative II: Autonomy and “status first”

Respondents who subscribe to the second narrative, which we have called “status first”, view the granting of special status (such as independence, autonomy, or federalization) to NGCAs and subsequent local elections as a key priority that should precede the restoration of border control and prepare the ground for further steps toward peace. Like the “border first” approach, this narrative does not entail a unified position on the potential restoration of Ukrainian statehood. While some “status first” supporters insist on “independence at any price” for the NGCAs, others recommend the granting of special status to Lugansk and Donetsk as a temporary solution on the way to a more comprehensive settlement. Here, too, the moderate positions offer space for exploring mutually acceptable solutions.

### *Position 4: “Independence or unification with Russia”*

“The word ‘Ukraine’ means ‘death with braided hair’ [...]. I mean, these whole negotiations are playing with fire. Do whatever you want, tell me on radio and television whatever you want. With a friendly smile, strangle your own people...” (Russian Federation, Donbas refugees)

As reflected in the quote above, supporters of the “independence at any price” position perceive the potential reintegration and restoration of Kyiv’s control

over the border with Russia as an immediate threat to their security. The statements by some NGCA inhabitants and most of the Donbas refugees in Russia interviewed in the study reflect the position that “war has created a point of no return”. They subscribe to the view that, as a result of the war and six years of alienation, the only option for the NGCAs is maximal independence from the central authorities in Kyiv or incorporation into Russia, should independence be hindered.

In other words, like the radical positions within the “border first” narrative, the “independence at any price” position revolves around the role played by Russia. The popular perception of Russia as a guarantor of peace and a selfless protector of the local population provides a basis for seeing the potential unification of the NGCAs with Russia as an attractive alternative to re-unification with Ukraine, especially if the latter entails “hard reintegration”.

The “independence at any price” stance comes from the parties’ immediate need for physical safety and human security in a broader sense. The permeability of the border with Russia has proved vital for NGCA inhabitants during the intensive fighting and the subsequent isolation from Ukraine. Without a solution to their political status, and without guarantees from Kyiv regarding the safety of Donbas, these respondents are afraid of being pinned between a closed border with Russia and a regime of restricted access at the line of contact.

The call for full independence is motivated not only by considerations of

hard security but also by psychosocial considerations. In particular, NGCA inhabitants and Donbas refugees in Russia fear “retribution” from Ukraine should they reintegrate. This fear has been exacerbated by the psychosocial consequences of the armed conflict and six years of alienation between the NGCAs and the GCAs. Heavily traumatized by their immediate experience of war and exposure to death, destruction, and displacement, Donbas refugees in Russia in particular fear that if Ukraine regains full control over the territory of the NGCAs, the conflict will resume. Many inhabitants of the NGCAs fear that reintegration will result in their being treated as “second-class citizens” by the GCAs due to perceived cultural and linguistic differences that are also reflected in socio-political orientation (e.g. “pro-Maidan” vs “anti-Maidan”, pro-Western vs pro-Russian).

The need for full independence and separation from the Ukrainian state also seems to be justified by the adherents to this position on socio-economic grounds. The limited mobility of goods and persons, lack of access to economic opportunities across the line of contact, and the embargo against the NGCAs all give rise to unfavourable prospects for local development and cooperation in the future. This perception has fed the belief that independence or unification with Russia are the only viable options. Here again, these fears are directly related to the need for security and access to a dignified livelihood.

As in the case of “hard reintegration”, one of the reasons behind this hard-line “independence or unification with Rus-

sia” stance seems to be lack of transparency and information about the Minsk Process and its provisions. A transparent and solid communication strategy would serve all parties concerned.<sup>15</sup>

### *Position 5: “Transitional autonomy and soft independence”*

“If there is a peaceful life there and five to ten years pass, the very issue of special status will disappear over time.” (central Ukraine)

At the other end of the spectrum within the “status first” narrative are supporters of “transitional autonomy”, who also view granting NGCAs autonomous status as an important first step on the way to peace. In contrast to those who adhere to the previous “full independence or unification of Russia” stance, however, they look at the issue from the perspective of Ukraine’s national interest. The respondents who belong to this group are moderate insofar as they accept that the experience of war and six years of alienation between the GCAs and the NGCAs have created a new reality that must be taken into account in the peace process. Rather than viewing autonomous status as an ultimate solution, however, they understand it as a temporary compromise that will ensure that Ukraine “does not lose the Donbas”. This transitional autonomy, combined with the restoration of Ukrainian statehood in the NGCAs, is perceived by these respondents as one of the most promising means of restoring peace.

### *Shared interests: a positive presence of the Ukrainian state serving popular needs*

As a preliminary conclusion, it is clear that several of the abovementioned positions offer space for shared interests. The “soft independence” position (Position 5) is reflected in the account of respondents from all areas of Ukraine. Like the “soft reintegration” approach, it is also a moderate position aimed at a settlement of the conflict through a positive presence of the Ukrainian state, with the ultimate interest of serving popular needs and preserving national interests, and counteracting an increased Russification of the Donbas.

Although this position of “transitional autonomy and soft independence” was most prominently reflected in the statements by respondents in the GCAs, it seems to be compatible with the interests of the NGCA population. A large part of the NGCA respondents were not categorically against their territory remaining (or becoming again) part of Ukraine, but were primarily opposed to a “hard reintegration” for fear of Ukrainian retaliation.

### **Synthesis of converging interests and related recommendations**

Our brief analysis of the two key narratives on the issue of the restoration of Ukrainian statehood has uncovered converging interests that open a space for potential dialogue. Behind most of the positions are interests related to survival, security, socio-economic well-being, and

access to a dignified livelihood. In the following, we offer recommendations to relevant target groups with respect to the identified areas of shared concern. Elaborating more concrete measures to this effect is beyond the scope of this contribution, however, and must be further explored by all actors who remain committed to a peaceful settlement of the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

#### **1) Security and survival**

Respondents from all groups mentioned security and the absence of armed violence as basic conditions for their existence, the survival of the state, and the restoration of peace in general. The hard-line and emotionally charged “hard reintegration” and “independence at any price” positions seem to be rooted in a deep feeling of insecurity and existential threat. Negotiation and decisions on the restoration of statehood in the NGCAs must take these insecurities and fears into account if an agreement on the restoration of Ukrainian statehood in the NGCAs is to be possible and its implementation feasible.

### *Recommendations*

#### **a) to the Ukrainian government**

- Develop measures to ease the reintegration of NGCA inhabitants and returning Donbas refugees, e.g. by offering guarantees that NGCA inhabi-

tants in Ukraine will not be discriminated against.

**b) to the Russian government and NGCA de facto authorities**

- Contribute to demilitarization and demining in the NGCAs.

**2) Restoration of statehood and a “positive” Ukrainian state presence**

Another area of shared interest reflected mainly in the moderate positions outlined above is the restoration of a “positive” Ukrainian state presence in the Donbas area as a whole, based on respect for the rights of – and meeting the needs of – local inhabitants of both the NGCAs and the GCAs. Notably, respondents from the border zones in the GCAs, the NGCAs, and Russia mentioned the need to find pragmatic solutions to problems related to socio-economic development, the reconstruction of infrastructure, and trans-border mobility. Many respondents from the NGCAs (in both the Luhansk and the Donetsk regions) showed openness to the idea of “soft re-integration” based on autonomous status combined with a positive Ukrainian state presence. Several respondents from different groups stated that a moderate “soft integration” position combined with the recognition of transitional autonomy or “soft independence” was an area of shared interest that could be further explored.

**Recommendations**

**a) to the Ukrainian government**

- Develop a comprehensive and coherent strategy for state-building and local development in the NGCAs in order to win the confidence and support of the local population and facilitate reintegration.
- Develop an easy, secure and transparent regime of transfer between NGCAs and GCAs at line of contact checkpoints.

**b) to the OSCE, the Ukrainian government and civil society organizations**

- Develop cooperation mechanisms between the OSCE and the Ministry for the Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, on the one hand, and civil society organizations with expertise in transitional justice, dialogue initiatives and local development in NGCAs, on the other.

**c) to the Russian government and NGCA de facto authorities**

- Support the mobility of Ukrainian citizens between NGCAs and GCAs by contributing to a simple, secure, and transparent regime of transfer between NGCAs and GCAs at the line of contact, notably through the renewal of operations at existing

checkpoints and the opening of additional ones in the Luhansk region (at Schaste and Zolotoe).

porary steps being a more realistic approach than “one big solution”.

### 3) Transparency and communication

Several respondents from the GCAs, the NGCAs, the Donbas refugee population, and Russia indicated that the little information they have on the content and procedures of the Minsk Process comes from informal channels.

### c) *to the Russian Government and NGCA de facto authorities*

- Promote the establishment of an open communicative space in the NGCAs for Ukrainian and international media (including the availability of Ukrainian and international broadcasting in digital, analogue, and cable formats).

## Recommendations

### a) *to the OSCE and the Ukrainian and Russian governments*

- Develop mechanisms of systematic and regular communication for transmitting and discussing information about the Minsk Process and its components, the progress of the negotiations, and the continuous work of the TCG with the larger public, including Ukrainian, Russian, and international audiences.

### b) *to the Ukrainian government*

- Communicate openly and transparently about the transitional nature of the special status and autonomy of the NGCAs, as foreseen in the Minsk Process. This would contribute to reducing tensions and polarization at the societal level, with small and tem-

## Notes

- 1 We would like to take this opportunity to thank the external reviewers, whose comments helped to put the finishing touches to this article.
- 2 The members of the research team came from different geographic areas affected by the conflict, as do the authors of this paper, who were members of the team and are participants of the dialogue platform WIPD.
- 3 The Women’s Initiatives for Peace in Donbas (WIPD) is a platform for dialogue and cooperation on issues related to the conflict in eastern Ukraine among women in Ukraine, including non-government-controlled areas, Russia, and Western Europe. For more information on the WIPD, see Dana Jirouš, “Red lights and diapraxis”, FriEnt Website, TJ Blog, 15 November 2019, at: [https://www.frient.de/en/blogdata/tj-blog/red-lights-and-diapraxis?fbclid=IwAR03ALYQC59\\_5VNxMpo0UV6VYAaYONdIWwOqbVQU1FR65YsnRrvEI6OhevY](https://www.frient.de/en/blogdata/tj-blog/red-lights-and-diapraxis?fbclid=IwAR03ALYQC59_5VNxMpo0UV6VYAaYONdIWwOqbVQU1FR65YsnRrvEI6OhevY).
- 4 Beyond its conceptual support, the WIPD provided valuable access to respondents from all conflict parties, help-

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- 5 For a description of the origins of the concept “diapraxis”, see Jean-Nicolas Bitter, “Diapraxis in Different Contexts: A Brief Discussion with Rasmussen”, in: *Politorbis* 2/2011, pp. 65–69.
  - 6 Roger Fisher/William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
  - 7 Information on the exact numbers and origin of dead and injured persons (2014–2020) can be found here: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine: 16 November 2019 to 15 February 2020, February 2020, at: [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/29thReportUkraine\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/29thReportUkraine_EN.pdf).
  - 8 According to the Unified Information Database on Internally Displaced Persons of the Ministry for Social Policy of Ukraine, as of 12 May 2020, 1,446,651 internally displaced persons from the NGCAs of Donetsk and Luhansk and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea have been registered. See the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, Official Website, 12 May 2020, at: <https://www.msp.gov.ua/news/18640.html>.
  - 9 Maria Litvinova, “Mama posadila menya v poezd v Belgorod, a na sleduyushchiy den’ v zdanie vokzala popal snyaryad” (“*My mother put me on a train to Belgorod, and the next day a shell hit the station building*” – CD), *Kommersant*, 18 April 2020, at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4323849>.
  - 10 “Ukraine crisis in maps”, BBC News, 18 February 2015, at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27308526>.
  - 11 The latter are also referred to as Certain Areas of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions (CADLRs).
  - 12 For further information on the official peace process in Ukraine (the Minsk Process), see: OSCE, Protocol of the Results of the Consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group, signed in Minsk on 5 September 2014, 5 September 2014, available at: <https://www.osce.org/ru/home/123258?download=true>; “Full text of the Minsk agreement (English version)”, *Financial Times*, 12 February 2015, at: <https://www.ft.com/content/21b8f98e-b2a5-11e4-b234-00144feab7de>. See also: Anna Hess Sargsyan, “Introduction” and “Conclusion”, *The Security and Human Rights Monitor Special Issue on OSCE Mediation and Conflict Management*, November 2017, at: <https://www.shrmonitor.org/security-human-rights-special-issue-osces-mediation-conflict-management-introduction-conclusion/>; Anna Hess Sargsyan, “Unpacking complexity in the Ukraine peace process”, *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* Nr. 243, Benno Zogg, ed., April 2019, at: <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse243-EN.pdf>.
  - 13 For further information about internal Ukrainian debates on special status, see RFE/RL’s Ukrainian Service, “Ukrainian lawmakers extend Donbas special status law until end of 2020”, RFE/RL, 12 December 2019, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-lawmakers-extend-donbas-special-status-law-until-end-of-2020/30321863.html>.
  - 14 Johan Galtung, *Peace: Research–Education–Action. Essays in Peace Research I*, Copenhagen: Ejlert, 1975.
  - 15 A positive example in this regard is the blog on the website of the Ukrainian presidential administration on current

activities in the framework of the Minsk Process. See “TCG meeting: OSCE noted sustainable regime of silence for 80 days, emphasizing the need for its further observance”, President of Ukraine Official

Website, 14 October 2020, at: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zasidannya-tkg-obsye-vidznachila-stalij-rezhim-tishi-v-prodov-64589>.

