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Ukraine

After the cease-fire – the Minsk "Armistice" has made it possible to freeze the conflict at a crucial moment

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It has already been two weeks since a cease-fire was signed in Minsk on September 5. And although since then both parties - Ukraine on the one hand, and the unrecognized "people's republics" on the other - have denounced violations of the cease-fire by the opposing party almost daily, we can already say that it is highly unlikely that the agreement will be officially broken in the coming weeks. After the cease-fire – the Minsk "Armistice" has made it possible to freeze the conflict at a crucial moment

The "Minsk Agreement" has not been able to give precise answers to the questions posed by the conflict in eastern Ukraine, starting with one of the main ones: the one concerning the real participants in the conflict and their real objectives. While the agenda of the negotiations in Minsk envisaged discussing the plan presented by Vladimir Putin in person, Russia continues to deny its role as a party to the conflict.

Despite the growing avalanche of facts demonstrating the direct presence of Russian troops on Ukrainian soil, the Kremlin's strategy remains unchanged: it is to present itself as an anxious "third party", ready to seal the fate of the Ukrainian state with its "Western partners". The bloodshed in the Donbass, which has already killed more than 5,000 civilians, must necessarily appear as the backdrop so that an agreement that redefines the place of Russia in the post-Soviet space and in the system of international relations is found with the West.

Before the point of no return

The agreement signed in Minsk expressed no opinion on the status of the "people's republics" or on their borders (which correspond either to the administrative boundaries of Lugansk and Donetsk Oblasts or to a distinctly smaller proportion of these territories which is effectively under the control of pro-Russian groups). However, this agreement establishes the most important thing: the end of military operations with a view to resolving the conflict. The defeats of the army engaged in the "anti-terrorist operation," the weariness of society with regard to the war (according to recent polls, over 50 per cent of Ukrainians are in favour of an immediate cessation of military operations, without conditions) and the collapse of the national economy are forcing the Ukrainian authorities to sign an armistice. The balance sheet of the NATO summit in Wales, in the course of which Ukraine was literally denied military aid, has also been a strong argument: the 16 million euros generously promised to meet the needs of Ukraine are barely enough to buy three tanks...

Moreover, it has become almost impossible for Russia to conceal its full participation in the conflict: in fact, in the last week of August, the Russian opposition media began to publicize evidence about the secret funerals of some paratroopers who had been killed in action, and the independent "Committees of Soldiers Mothers" reported hundreds of serving soldiers killed or wounded on Ukrainian soil.

Finally, the economic and social catastrophe that affects Donetsk, Lugansk and other cities in the region has reached such a scale that there is a risk of going beyond the point of no return. Most of the hundreds of thousands of refugees resettled either in Russia or in the central and western regions of Ukraine are hoping to return home as soon as possible. Otherwise, the state will necessarily have to provide them with jobs and proper housing, and the demographic losses in eastern Ukraine will at that point be difficult to compensate. The prospect of seeing the emergence of an unrecognized state, with a ruined economy, where there is the accumulation of a large quantity of uncontrolled weapons scares Russia even more than it does the West.

The conflict "frozen" ... and now?

Moreover, it is very difficult to imagine these territories returning to a united Ukraine under any sort of "special status" after a war that was short but fierce (and, despite the military involvement of Russia, had within it obvious elements of civil confrontation). Artillery bombardment of civilian neighborhoods and the abductions and summary executions on both sides were accompanied by a particularly powerful stream of aggressive propaganda. The Ukrainian and Russian television channels (some of the latter being mainly watched on the territory of the unrecognized "people's republics") conducted an enormous effort of dehumanization of the opposing party by building up the image of the absolute enemy with whom it is impossible to agree and whom one can only destroy.

The Minsk "Armistice" has made it possible to freeze the conflict at a crucial moment, when the events generated and controlled by different elite groups (in Moscow, Kiev and Washington) are likely to develop according to their own cruel logic. A moment when the principal fault of those guilty of this tragedy is no longer to have started it, but of no longer being able to stop it.