5. Armed conflict and peace processes in Europe

Overview

One armed conflict was active in Europe in 2019: the low-intensity internationalized, subnational armed conflict in Ukraine. Since April 2014 this armed conflict between Ukrainian Government forces and Russian-backed separatists has led to about 13 000 deaths (at least 3330 civilians and approximately 9670 combatants), but since 2018 combat-related deaths have been much lower: estimated at 405 in 2019, down from 886 in 2018.

Political changes in Ukraine during 2019, and especially the presidential victory by Volodymyr Zelensky and his acceptance of the so-called 'Steinmeier formula' for resolving the conflict, created a new opportunity for further negotiations. At the first Normandy Format leaders meeting for more than three years, the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine endorsed the Steinmeier formula, agreed to implement a 'full and comprehensive' ceasefire by the end of the year and to hold further talks in four months. Despite this promising new opening, fundamental disagreements endured among the parties about the nature of the conflict and their involvement in it, as well as over the sequencing and implementation of the formula.

Although most of Europe has seemed peaceful for about two decades, various tensions remain, including: (a) persistent tensions between Russia and large parts of the rest of Europe; (b) long-standing conflicts that have not yet been resolved—especially in the post-Soviet space, the Western Balkans and Cyprus—in the latter, oil and gas discoveries, maritime border disputes and regional power rivalries added to tensions; and (c) the security response to problems on Europe's southern flank, which encompasses several European states' involvement in armed conflicts in Afghanistan, the Middle East and North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. There were 18 multilateral peace operations active in Europe in 2019, all of which had been active in the previous year.

Two issues that have been at the forefront of European security thinking in recent years—irregular migration and terrorism—both have a strong connection to developments in the south. The European Union (EU) has been at the forefront of managing irregular migration to Europe, and it is an issue that has been a prominent driver in EU engagement with Libya and Turkey. Terrorism continued to constitute a significant threat to security in Europe in 2019, although the latest trend reports suggest that the risk is declining.

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