5. Armed conflict and peace processes in Europe

Overview

Two armed conflicts were active in Europe in 2020: the interstate border conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan for control of Nagorno-Karabakh, which escalated into high-intensity conflict during the year, and the ongoing low-intensity internationalized, subnational armed conflict in Ukraine. Elsewhere in Europe, tensions persisted in largely quiescent but unresolved conflicts in the post-Soviet space, the Western Balkans and Cyprus. There were also persistent tensions between Russia and large parts of the rest of Europe, as well as serious and complex security challenges in Europe's southern flank (see section I).

During the year, three further levels of complexity added to these existing tensions: (a) the Covid-19 pandemic, (b) political protests in Belarus following a disputed presidential election in August 2020 and (c) increased tensions in the eastern Mediterranean, centred on Greece and Turkey but also pulling in other states on both sides. On a more promising note, a modest Kosovo–Serbia détente was mediated by the United States in September. There were 18 multilateral peace operations active in Europe in 2020, the same as in the previous year.

The six weeks of fighting that broke out in 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan was the most serious period of fighting since the 1988–94 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Azerbaijan regained control of about one third of Nagorno-Karabakh and most of the adjacent territories (section II). There were an estimated 6700 military and civilian fatalities. A Russian-brokered ceasefire in November ended the fighting, and at the end of the year Russian peacekeepers were helping to maintain an uneasy truce. However, several key issues have still to be clarified, including the future status and governance of Nagorno-Karabakh, how to reconcile potentially competing claims of returning internally displaced persons, Turkey's role in the implementation of the agreement and the future of the Minsk Process of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Ukraine has been the focus of Europe's main territorial conflict since 2014 (section III). In 2020 it was again not possible to bridge the fundamental disagreements among the parties about the nature of the conflict and their involvement in it, as well as the implementation of existing agreements. However, a new ceasefire agreement in July 2020 led to much lower levels of violence and civilian casualties during the year, and the conflict appeared to be heading in the direction of becoming another of Europe's simmering conflicts.

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