



## **CEC Weekly Political Update**

**29th November 2018**

### **Sea of Azov Incident**

#### **The Incident**

On November 25, three Ukrainian navy ships (two artillery boats and a tug) on the Black Sea attempted to cross the Kerch strait and enter the Azov Sea to the Ukrainian port of Mariupol. During the passage, Russian coast guard vessels performed provocative manoeuvres and consequently, a Ukrainian tug boat was rammed by an FSB (Russian Federal Security Service) patrol boat. Russian forces pursued Ukrainian navy ships ordering them to stop. The Ukrainian navy ships refused – Russian forces opened fire, and later boarded the Ukrainian ships. One ship was damaged and immobilised, 24 sailors were captured, including 6 injured – according to Ukrainian authorities.

Russian authorities argue that the Ukrainian vessels were in contempt of international maritime law and illegally entered the temporarily closed territorial waters of the Russian Federation. The Ukrainian government, on the other hand, argues that the incident occurred on the Black Sea, which allows for the free movement of all vessels and that Crimea – annexed by Russia in 2014 – is part of Ukraine, hence surrounding waters are not Russian territory. Furthermore, the Ukrainians argue that a bilateral treaty between Russia and the Ukraine, signed in 2003, allows for the unimpeded access to the Kerch Strait and Sea of Azov.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko called an emergency hearing of the country's War Cabinet, the Security and National Defence Council, to discuss the possibility of implementing martial law. The Ukrainian parliament allowed for a 30-day martial law in specific regions most vulnerable to attack from Russia. Additionally, parliament decided that martial law will have no effect on the date of Presidential elections, which will be held on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019. Some international commentators argued that Poroshenko's bid to impose martial law was motivated by an opportunity to capitalise on the situation – boost his low support and postpone elections.

## **Reactions**

### **POLAND**

The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement condemning Russia's aggressive actions and argued that the country breached the principle of freedom of navigation. Poland also urged both Russia and the Ukraine to show restraint.

### **US**

During the UN's Security Council meeting, US ambassador Nikki Haley called the incident a Russian provocation and reiterated strong US support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders extending to its territorial waters. Her statement in the UN was also made on behalf of the UK. France, the

Her statement in the UN was also made on behalf of the UK, France, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also called on Russia to return Ukrainian vessels and detained sailors. President Trump may cancel a set meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the upcoming G20 summit.

## **UN**

UN Secretary General António Guterres called on Russia and the Ukraine to avoid further escalation.

## **EU**

EU Commission spokesperson Maja Kocijancic said, “We expect Russia to ensure the resumption of a free passage through the Kerch Strait and that the captured vessels are released”. Sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia, in regard to the annexation of Crimea, are still in place. Though certain countries have called for new sanctions to be imposed, unanimity will be required.

## **NATO**

NATO issued a statement arguing that “there is no justification for Russia’s use of military force against Ukrainian ships and naval personnel. We call on Russia to release the Ukrainian sailors and ships it seized, without delay. We call for calm and restraint.” Furthermore, NATO has reiterated support for Ukraine’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and pledged to continue to provide political and practical support to the country within the framework of our established cooperation.

## **Implications**

Since 2014, Russia has been implementing an aggressive and cross platform attempt to use the threat of force and its military capabilities as tools of strong-arm diplomacy intended to divide, distract, and deter Europe from challenging Russia’s activities in its immediate neighbourhood. Threats of military actions, wargames which simulate ‘worst-case scenarios’, the deployment of combat units in order to send

political messages, and intrusions of European airspace, waters, and territories are all a part of a coercive political strategy against European and NATO interests and contributing to a fragmentation of unity within both the EU and NATO. There is no evidence however that Russia intends to initiate outright hostilities with European states or NATO as Russian decisionmakers do not think that NATO would stand idly by, if prospective members or the northern flank would be threatened.

## **War in Ukraine**

The likelihood of a large-scale armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine seems small, but it cannot be excluded in all certainty. Experts are arguing that the main risk lies in the Russian officer corps which has a tendency of bluffing and making risky, sometimes outright irresponsible, decisions. Furthermore, Russia has developed airborne units, which means that it can deploy considerable forces over long distances in a short time, if the political decision changes.

While a large-scale conflict is not probable, increased small-scale hostilities seem more likely. It would benefit both Russia and Ukraine. In the Russian case increasing nationalistic sentiments and strengthening the authoritarian course would aid the ruling elites which are embroiled in crisis. In the Ukrainian case, increased Russian hostilities would increase President Poroshenko's chances in the March 2019 presidential election.

Further small-scale clashes would also increase the likelihood of further sanctions against Russia. This would increase the chances for a permanent US base being established in Poland. The incident in the Azov Sea will reduce Russian influence in the EU, weakening those politicians in the Union which are seeking reconciliation with Moscow.

## **Effects on Poland**

The immediate effect of the incident in the Azov Sea is negligible for foreign investors in Poland. Poland, as a NATO and EU member, is under no threat of direct Russian military activities. Russian activities against

Poland are limited to media spin and covert subversion.

Of course, if the conflict escalates, Poland might be affected by an increased influx of migrants and refugees from Ukraine. In general, Poland has been welcoming of Ukrainian migration as way of covering shortfalls in low-paid and unskilled labour due to Polish emigration to western Europe. Many Ukrainians in Poland in turn are avoiding military service and the probability of many of them returning to the Ukraine in the event of military mobilisation is low.

At an international level, the renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine may push Poland to take a more vocal position in Brussels and NATO on the need for stronger sanctions against Russia. In this effort, it might find itself at odds with some EU members, and even certain elements in the Trump administration that are cautious about the need for turning the screws on Russia. Overall however, it seems that the weight of foreign policy traditionalists in the US State Department and Defense Department will be dominant and that an uptick of US support for Ukraine, for example in decisions by the newly Democrat dominated Congress to increase military support for Ukraine, might be expected. Poland will be supportive of this and will be critical of those in the EU seeking a less dramatic response to Russia. If so, Poland will confirm its image as a US “Trojan Horse” in Central Europe in the eyes of Russia moderates in Berlin, Paris and Brussels.

## CONCLUSION

- No short term threat to Polish internal political stability
- Possibility of some weakening of Polish Zloty as investors display caution over an “emerging market currency” in Europe, as the Zloty is still seen
- May polarize opinion in EU and push Poland into closer alignment with the US as opposed to Europe
- Poland may use a weak German or French response to Putin as justifying continued Euro-scepticism

political and media intelligence, monitoring and analysis for Western multinationals in the region. Key expertise includes the defence, energy, environment, IT, financial and extractive industry sectors. CEC also has experience in media management, local government, and third-party mobilisation as an integral part of its communications activities. The Warsaw office works closely with other CEC offices in Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, as well as its partner agencies in other European Union countries.

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