

# Presence without Power: Lessons from the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) for Ceasefire Monitoring in Ukraine

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# Abstract

As discussions around a partial or temporary ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine are gaining traction, policymakers are exploring ways to monitor, guarantee and enforce such a ceasefire. An international ceasefire monitoring mission, deployed in agreement with both Russia and Ukraine, may be the lowest common denominator solution that emerges. While associated with significant drawbacks, such a mission could be useful, if accompanied by a robust military presence or an economic sanctions mechanism to effectively deter Russia from attacking again. The deployment of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (2014-2022) offers useful lessons in terms of setting up the political agreement, mandate design and operations of such an international presence. These lessons will be explored in this brief.

## Introduction

As Russia's continues to wage its full-scale war against Ukraine, a sustainable political resolution remains deeply unrealistic. Still, as discussions around a partial or temporary ceasefire are gaining traction, policymakers are increasingly exploring ways to monitor, guarantee and enforce such a ceasefire.<sup>1</sup> Despite public statements to the contrary, European political alignment on how to guarantee a ceasefire (whether that be through military or civilian measures) remains limited<sup>2</sup> – especially in a scenario where the United States is not involved in the effort.

**The political reality is such that a sustainable, long-term solution may not be in the cards.**

The political reality is such that a sustainable, long-term solution may not be in the cards. With the Trump administration's push to "end the war in three days" on the one hand, and Europe's questionable willingness and ability to deploy the troops necessary for a robust peace enforcement (or deterrence effort) on the other hand, solutions optimal for Ukraine's long-term future are likely not in store. Instead, pragmatic solutions will have to be found. As such, an international ceasefire monitoring mission, deployed in agreement with both Russia and Ukraine, may be the lowest common denominator solution – and a politically acceptable compromise to freeze the status quo in the short-term. In many ways, this plan is riddled with significant disadvantages and risks. But, in the current political climate, it may be the only feasible option. It is therefore worth discussing how best to implement a ceasefire monitoring mission – however flawed it may be – in a manner that is least harmful to those involved.

Ceasefire monitoring is not a replacement for security guarantees for Ukraine. It is a narrowly defined conflict management tool, which can lead to "extended periods of reduced violence," although "achieving long-term ceasefires is extremely challenging in the absence of a political process."<sup>3</sup> Ceasefire monitoring differs fundamentally from peace enforcement, peacekeeping

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<sup>1</sup> France24, "France and Britain will lead mission to support a future Ukrainian peace deal, Macron says," 27 March 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250327-live-macron-to-host-european-leaders-in-paris-for-ukraine-security-summit>.

<sup>2</sup> John Irish, Lili Bayer, Andrew Grey "Europe's talks on Ukraine security shift from sending troops," Reuters, 26 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/europes-talks-ukraine-security-shift-sending-troops-2025-03-26/>.

<sup>3</sup> Govinda Clayton, "Pause for Thought: Contemporary Ceasefire Politics," Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, January 2025, HD-OF-2024-Pause-for-thought-contemporary-ceasefire-politics.pdf, also, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, "Drawing a line: A 'Swiss Army Knife' of Options for Achieving a Sustainable Ceasefire in Ukraine," March 2025, [https://www.gcsp.ch/sites/default/files/2025-03/GCSP\\_CF-Toolkit\\_2025%3Bdigital\\_v2\\_0.pdf](https://www.gcsp.ch/sites/default/files/2025-03/GCSP_CF-Toolkit_2025%3Bdigital_v2_0.pdf).

or any other mechanisms that are currently being debated. Its appeal lies in its relatively low cost and the reduced political risk for states deploying unarmed monitors (in comparison to the risk associated with a more robust effort).<sup>4</sup> A drawback to ceasefire monitoring is that it can create the illusion of progress without actually contributing to a solution, and instead can lead to the “freezing of the conflict”.<sup>5</sup>

The deployment of the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) illustrates these tensions. Tasked to monitor the ceasefire as well as the withdrawal of heavy weapons under the 2014 and 2015 Minsk Agreements, the SMM operated in a context where the political process eventually came to a full stop. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 abruptly put the SMM’s activities to a violent end, and Russia voted against the extension of the mission’s mandate shortly after. Though the mission documented over 1.5 million ceasefire violations between 2016 and 2021 alone<sup>6</sup> – thereby fulfilling what it had set out to do and enhancing transparency regarding conflict dynamics – it was never set up to deter violence in the long-term (and, consequently, did not). Instead, it inadvertently stabilized a violent status quo – serving merely as a placeholder for a political process that never decisively moved forward. Some argue, therefore, that its greatest achievement was the fact that it was able to continue its operations and maintain its presence for as long as it did.<sup>7</sup>

**To end Russian aggression, a ceasefire monitoring mission would have to be backed up by a robust military presence.**

In this brief, we will discuss the lessons we can draw from the SMM’s experience in terms of the political agreement underlying it, the set-up of the mission and its operations. Chief among these lessons: A mission of any kind – civilian or military, with the goal of enforcing peace or monitoring a ceasefire – is a function of the political will of those setting it up. It is an instrument dependent on political commitment, unable to function in its absence. This notion should be central to European deliberations on any future effort, be it civilian or military, a multilateral effort (through an organization Russia is part of) or a “coalition of the willing” (made up by NATO countries).

An equally crucial learning from the SMM is that merely establishing an international presence is not enough to end Russian aggression in Ukraine. To do so (and assuming that that is indeed the ultimate objective), a ceasefire monitoring mission would have to be backed up by a robust military presence, ready to effectively deter Russia from attacking again.<sup>8</sup> This could also be achieved by setting up a robust economic sanction mechanism (automatically imposing renewed sanctions, for example, or reversing sanctions relief) that would kick into gear in the case of a violation of the ceasefire agreement (beyond a previously agreed-upon threshold, that is). Such a mechanism should be an asymmetric tool and focus on the aggressor that needs to be deterred from attacking again: Russia.

Another critical lesson: policymakers must closely and continuously examine whether the benefits of a mission’s presence outweigh its costs. As stated in an interview for this brief, “if the ceasefire violation is the norm, not the exception, the very concept of a ceasefire becomes

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<sup>4</sup> Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, Rainer L. Glatz and Philipp Rotmann, “Schutzzonen: Möglichkeiten, Grenzen, Dilemmata,” Beirat Zivile Krisenprävention und Friedensförderung, 2021, <https://beirat-zivile-krisenpraevention.org/publikation/schutzzonen/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p.64.

<sup>6</sup> Number of ceasefire violations listed per year here: OSCE SMM “2021 Trends and Oversvations,” 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/a/511327.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> André Härtel, Anton Pisarenko, and Andreas Umland, “The OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. The SMM’s Work in the Donbas and Its Ukrainian Critique in 2014–2019.” Security and Human Rights, 2020, 31: 121–54.

<sup>8</sup> Claudia Major and Aldo Kleemann, “Modelle zur Absicherung eines möglichen Waffenstillstandes in der Ukraine,” SWP Arbeitspapier, Januar 2025, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Arbeitspapier\\_FG03\\_02\\_2025\\_C\\_Major\\_A\\_Kleemann.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Arbeitspapier_FG03_02_2025_C_Major_A_Kleemann.pdf)

meaningless.”<sup>9</sup> If that is indeed the case, continuing a mission or launching a new one only feeds into illusions among the international community of “having dealt” with the conflict, when in reality, the mission does nothing more than relegate a renewed outbreak of violence to the future, while leading to a false sense of hope among affected populations.<sup>10</sup>

**“If the ceasefire violation is the norm, not the exception, the very concept of a ceasefire becomes meaningless.”**

The fundamental driver of the war has not changed since 2014; Russia’s aim remains to end Ukraine’s national sovereignty. Certain contexts and conditions, however, are significantly different in 2025; the war has taken on a new, full-scale dimension since 2022, Russia is openly a belligerent party to the conflict, Europe is investing a great deal more in the conflict (politically, economically, militarily), as did the US up until the second Trump administration. Now, the US seeks to strike a deal with Russia, seemingly at all costs.<sup>11</sup> Since the Minsk Agreements and the SMM have become notoriously unpopular in Ukraine over time, it is unlikely that either the government in Kyiv or local populations would accept a new ceasefire mission, if it is not accompanied by security guarantees or another kind of mechanism to deter renewed Russian aggression. All of these factors will impact how a future ceasefire mission could be deployed.

This is the political backdrop against which this policy brief is written. It draws on available literature<sup>12</sup> as well as on insights from nine interviews with former SMM staff (at varying levels) and officials involved in its set-up and management. We expressly do not offer a comprehensive assessment of the SMM. Rather, we distill lessons from the process of negotiating the Minsk Agreements, which codified the ceasefire the SMM ended up monitoring, the OSCE SMM’s mandate, as well as its operations, all the while taking the changed political circumstances into account. These lessons may prove applicable in the near future if it so happens that a monitoring mission emerges as the only politically viable compromise.

## A Fraught Political Process

The Minsk Agreements, signed in September 2014 and February 2015, intended to establish a ceasefire in Ukraine. One of the parties, Russia, denied its direct involvement in the conflict, claiming instead that its proxy forces in Donetsk and Luhansk were the sole responsible parties. Moscow mainly agreed to a cessation of hostilities because Russia assumed it could continue to undermine Ukraine through other means. The Agreements were concluded at a

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<sup>9</sup> Interview, former SMM leadership, 12 March 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Heinemann-Grüder et al., “Schutzzonen.

<sup>11</sup> Sabine Fischer, “Alles über die Ukraine ohne die Ukraine,” SWP Aktuell, April 2025, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/alles-ueber-die-ukraine-ohne-die-ukraine>.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Andreas Umland, “Achievements and Limitations of the OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine,” Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2021, <https://sceus.se/en/publications/achievements-and-limitations-of-the-osces-special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine>; Härtel et al., “The OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine”; Aly Verjee, “Ceasefire Monitoring under Fire: The OSCE, Technology, and the 2022 War in Ukraine,” *Global Policy*, 2022, 13: 808–17. doi:10.1111/1758-5899.13123; Kristian Atland, “War, Diplomacy, and More War: Why did the Minsk Agreements Fail?,” *Int. Polit* (2024), doi:10.1057/s41311-024-00637-x; Johannes Regenbrecht, “10 Jahre Abkommen von Minsk: 10 Lehren für Verhandlungen mit Moskau,” Zentrum Liberale Moderne, Januar 2025, <https://libmod.de/10-jahre-abkommen-von-minsk-10-lehren-fuer-verhandlungen-mit-moskau/>; Nataliya Bugayova, “Lessons of the Minsk Deal: Breaking the Cycle of Russia’s War in Ukraine,” Institute for the Study of War, February 2025, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/lessons-minsk-deal-breaking-cycle-russias-war-against-ukraine>; Alexander Hug, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology: Insights from Ukraine 2014–2022,” *CSS Mediation Resources*, 2024.

time when Ukraine was under great pressure on the battlefield. Moscow therefore held the upper hand in the negotiations, which is why the Agreements are widely criticized as having mainly favored Russia's demands.<sup>13</sup> While it is likely that a better compromise could not have been struck under those circumstances, the Agreements ended up "reinforc[ing] Western delusions that Putin might simply settle if he received some land or if the West metered support to Ukraine or tried harder to negotiate with Putin."<sup>14</sup>

## Negotiations

After the Russian annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas in late spring of 2014, a complex mix of structures gradually emerged to manage the conflict. These included the Normandy format (N4), established in June 2014, which brought together the heads of states of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, as well as the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) and its four working groups, chaired by the OSCE. Once the Minsk Agreements took force, a Joint Center of Control and Coordination (JCCC) between Ukrainian and Russian military staff was set up to enable the coordination and recording of ceasefire violations (although by 2017, Russian staff terminated its participation in the JCCC). The OSCE's SMM preceded all these structures; it was set up in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea in March of 2014, prior to the outbreak of hostilities in eastern Ukraine and the Minsk Agreements.

The Minsk Agreements were negotiated in the N4 format, but were not signed by the heads of state; rather, they were signed by their representatives in the TCG, including representatives of the Russian proxy forces in Donetsk and Luhansk – obfuscating the Agreements' formal status and authority right from the start.<sup>15</sup> An important premise of the Agreements was that a complete cessation of hostilities was considered a precondition for political settlement.<sup>16</sup> In reality, the ceasefire was constantly violated and the process of implementing the political settlement hardly moved forward.

Russia would always demand more from Kyiv, even if Ukraine implemented the Agreements fully

Since the provisions of the Agreements represented severe infringements on Ukraine's sovereignty,<sup>17</sup> it was difficult, if not impossible, for Kyiv to implement them. Implementation was made even harder by Moscow's continued effort to further maximize Russian demands, constantly pushing the envelope of the Agreements.<sup>18</sup> This process confirmed to many Ukrainians that Russia would always demand *more* from Kyiv, even if Ukraine implemented the Agreements fully.<sup>19</sup>

The Minsk Agreements highlight the dangers of concluding a settlement in the absence of a willingness to resolve the underlying political conflict. The Agreements enabled Russia to consolidate its presence in Crimea and its support to its proxy forces in Donetsk and Luhansk, while the lack of enforcement or sanctions mechanism made the ceasefire so brittle that

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<sup>13</sup> Atland, "War, Diplomacy, and More War"; Julia Friedrich and Niklas Balbon, "What should we have to say about it: Perspectives on Peace in Eastern Ukraine", GPPi, April 2022, <https://gppi.net/2022/04/20/what-should-we-have-to-say-about-it-perspectives-on-peace-in-eastern-ukraine>.

<sup>14</sup> Bugayova, "Lessons of the Minsk Deal."

<sup>15</sup> Atland, "War, Diplomacy, and More War."

<sup>16</sup> Geneva Centre for Security Policy, "Drawing a line," p.22.

<sup>17</sup> This includes a "special status" law for Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and the fact that Crimea was excluded from negotiations – a *de facto* acceptance of the Russian land grab. For more details, see, e.g.: Duncan Allan, "The Minsk Conundrum," Chatham House, May 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine>.

<sup>18</sup> Regensbrecht, "10 Jahre Abkommen von Minsk."

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich and Balbon, "What Should we Have to Say About it."

Moscow was able to increase conflict intensity on the battlefield whenever it so desired.<sup>20</sup> The Agreements also gave Moscow ammunition to accuse Ukraine of non-compliance. The Kremlin was aware that the implementation of some of the provisions might exacerbate political infighting in Ukraine and further weaken the state – Russia exploited this power dynamic to its fullest. The Agreements served Russian narratives about alleged Ukrainian failures to implement specific provisions, which distracted from the fundamental issue at stake: Russia’s desire to control Ukraine’s domestic affairs. In this way, the Agreements “muddied Western thinking about the war.”<sup>21</sup>

Importantly, “vagueness and ambiguity of the language used in the Minsk agreements” may have been the only way to reach an agreement at the time. Later on, however, these ambiguities “became an obstacle to the agreements’ implementation, as the parties held contradicting and irreconcilable views of what they had agreed to at the negotiation table.”<sup>22</sup> While ambiguity is a necessary tool of diplomacy, it has its limits. The fact that the Minsk Agreements neither defined the so-called line of contact nor what constituted a ceasefire violation made the implementation and monitoring of the ceasefire nearly impossible.

**Lessons:** The Trump administration’s current guiding principle – namely, that the closing of a deal is more important than its content<sup>1</sup> – risks repeating the mistakes made during the Minsk Agreements. The latter followed a logic whereby striking a deal to end or limit further fighting in the short-term was considered preferable to a continued military confrontation, even if said deal legitimized Russian imperial conduct vis-à-vis Ukraine and thereby rendered a long-term resolution more costly and difficult to attain. In the debates about a possible ceasefire in the early months of 2025, we have seen a return of narratives blaming Ukraine and President Zelenskyy personally, for allegedly “not wanting peace,”<sup>1</sup> echoing the earlier Russian accusations that Ukraine was not complying with the Minsk Agreements. A deal struck under similar conditions as the Minsk Agreements only serves the stronger side. Both in 2014 and in 2025, this party is Russia.

Contrary to 2014, European states (and, in part, the US) have much more skin in the game now than they did before. This can help Ukraine offset the imbalance of negotiating against Russia, but only if the US (and Europeans, if they are present) chooses to throw their weight around and backs Ukraine. The immense unpopularity of the Minsk Agreements in Ukraine<sup>1</sup> teaches us that it will be difficult to get Kyiv’s approval for a deal they deem unfavorable. Even if granted, sustained popular support for its implementation is not guaranteed. Moscow is fully aware of this dynamic and will likely aim for provisions in the negotiation process that will (further) weaken Ukrainian unity in the future.

Finally, an important way to implement lessons from the way the Agreements were negotiated is for Ukraine and its partners to define a threshold below which a deal is not considered useful and signal their preparedness to walk away from the negotiation table if that is the case. A deal is likely below this threshold if the provisions of a ceasefire are so vague that its implementation is near impossible to observe, or if there is no mechanism sanctioning ceasefire violations (a military or economic reaction in case it is breached), as will be discussed in section 2.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview, former official involved in N4, 11 March 2025. Another interviewee pointed out that Russia would often intensify military activity (“open the tab”) prior to the meetings of the TCG.

<sup>21</sup> Bugayova, “Lessons of the Minsk Deal,” p.5.

<sup>22</sup> Atland, “War, Diplomacy, and More War,” p. 17.

## Russia's role in conflict management structures

The complicated set-up of the conflict management structures mentioned above played into Moscow's hand in several ways. Firstly, Russia was able to be a negotiating party in N4, while simultaneously presenting itself as an uninvolved "mediator" in the TCG. Secondly, none of the diplomatic formats had established rules of engagement or fixed terms of reference, which Moscow used to its advantage. Interviewees present in N4 and TCG meetings stressed that the lack of rules, ranging from who set the agenda to how decisions or results were recorded, was a major hindrance. Under these circumstances, it was "a miracle that eight additional agreements were concluded."<sup>23</sup> Russia sometimes tried to create one-sided protocols which were then rejected by the others. This lack of formal protocols, agreed to by all parties, meant that some aspects were discussed repeatedly, since negotiation results were not codified. This situation allowed Russia to focus on the smallest technical details, which exhausted other participants to a degree that made it very difficult for them to focus on the political issues at hand.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the lack of rules and coordination between the technical levels of conflict management and the political levels meant that Russia could bring up certain individual ceasefire violations again and again, at *all* levels (instead of merely the lowest, most technical level, where these discussions belong) – even in phone calls between heads of state.<sup>25</sup> This, again, shifted attention from the pressing political issues, while also allowing Russia to further amplify their claim of Ukrainian non-compliance. Russia also spoiled the TCG meetings, for instance by leaking details of the supposedly secret talks to the press or threatening to record negotiations. As one interviewee put it, Moscow "creat[ed] a crisis and then demand[ed] very costly concessions from everyone to resolve it."<sup>26</sup>

**Lessons:** EU policymakers should beware of Russia's negotiation tactics and insist on written agreements. Ideally, these agreements would be short, with unambiguously precise political provisions, but include a detailed, highly technical annex, thereby disallowing Russia to deliberately undermine the peace process by creating technical obstacles that slow down its implementation. Deep knowledge of and extensive preparation for Russia's tactics, the use of 'sticks and carrots' to alter Moscow's approach, and substantial pressure would be part of a concerted effort to prevent Russia acting as a spoiler (though US involvement in the negotiation may be indispensable for this effort to have effect).

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<sup>23</sup> Interview, former SMM leadership, 12 March 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, official and former participant in TCG meetings, 12 March 2025.



# Mission Set-up: Design Flaws

The above-mentioned inadequate steering of the conflict management structures, as well as the concessions and diplomatic ambiguities necessary to agree with Russia on a ceasefire in the Minsk Agreements translated into significant design flaws in the set-up of the SMM. The three most important shortcomings we will discuss are: (1) the mission's mandate, (2) the absence of a sanctions mechanism and (3) the mission's limited geographic scope.

## Mandate

The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine was set up three days after Russia formally annexed Crimea in March of 2014. The SMM mandate to “contribute ... to reducing tensions and fostering peace, stability and security, and to monitoring and supporting the implementation of all OSCE principles and commitments”<sup>27</sup> across Ukraine predated the start of the war in Donbas. The mission's main tasks outlined in the mandate were monitoring,

reporting and dialogue facilitation. It was thus designed as a “conflict prevention and resolution instrument” to manage and de-escalate the security situation “in and around Ukraine”<sup>28</sup> – not as a tool to manage the continent's biggest military confrontation in decades.

**The fact that the mandate predated the ceasefire that the mission ended up monitoring had several important implications.**

Only later was the OSCE, and thereby the SMM, tasked with monitoring and verifying the immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons<sup>29</sup> (key points of the Minsk Agreements in 2014 and 2015) – a significant change in scope, focus and purpose. Since the mandate was

flexible enough to accommodate these new tasks, it was not updated (then or at any later point). This aversity to updating the mandate was largely driven by the fear of not being able to reach an agreement between all 57 participating states.

The fact that the mandate predated the ceasefire that the mission ended up monitoring had several important implications. Firstly, the SMM monitored ceasefire violations without an agreed-upon definition of what constituted such a violation,<sup>30</sup> or a common agreement over the precise location of the line of contact – after all, the mandate had been drafted *before* the existence of a ceasefire. While this may not be unique among ceasefires missions, it still made the monitoring of violations, and particularly the withdrawal of heavy weapons, difficult (withdrawal from *where* precisely?).

Secondly, the mandate was purposely drafted to be vague; this “constructive diplomatic ambiguity”<sup>31</sup> was needed to come to any kind of agreement. While this broad character of the mandate allowed for the much-needed flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances, it also opened itself up for differing interpretations, even within the mission, and led to uncertainty about the mission's purpose. Perhaps for this reason, the mission's leadership never drafted a

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<sup>27</sup> OSCE Permanent Council, “Decision No.1117 Deployment of an OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine,” 21 March 2014, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/6/116747.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Hug, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology,” p.24.

<sup>29</sup> Hug, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology.”

<sup>30</sup> “The agreements defined the ceasefire only vaguely. With a few exceptions, they instead referred to the “cessation of the use of weapons”, “ban on firing” or a “comprehensive ceasefire” without defining it more explicitly.” In: Hug, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology,” p.34.

<sup>31</sup> OSCE, “A Peaceful Presence: The First Five Years of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine,” June 2021, [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/6/491220\\_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/6/491220_0.pdf), as quoted in Verjee, “Ceasefire Monitoring under Fire.”

Mission Implementation Plan – the standard planning document for military and civilian missions, which translates a mandate into concrete tasks a mission must fulfill. This gave the mission leadership and staff a great deal of leeway, but also meant that mission members themselves were unsure about their exact tasks. At times, they were unable to justify their presence to the local population (notably those living near the line of contact).<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the SMM’s purely civilian mandate was often criticized as inadequate (particularly during periods of conflict escalation)<sup>33</sup> and the possibility of arming observers or giving the mission a more robust mandate was raised frequently. Proponents of such an approach have argued, and continue to do so today, that lightly-armed observers might enhance personal safety and deter ceasefire violations, while critics have pointed out that even armed monitoring officers would be incapable of confronting an army that is equipped with advanced weaponry. As an interviewee stated: “What is the use if a monitoring officer has a gun, if they have to go up against artillery?”<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of whether a potential future mission would be military or civilian, both Russia and Ukraine would have to give security guarantees to such a mission, which would increase its safety to operate.<sup>35</sup> This is an important argument in favor of a multilateral mission deployed by an organization Russia is part of, such as the OSCE or the UN, although the detention of Ukrainian mission members after the full-scale invasion in 2022 casts a shadow of doubt over the value of Russia’s ‘guarantees.

**Lessons:** The main reason why the SMM was unable to live up to the high expectations and the responsibility laid upon it for conflict resolution was that its mandate granted it very limited authority to significantly affect the situation on the ground. Policymakers today need to be aware that a mission can only function as an extension of its mandate, which, in the context of a consensus-based organization like the OSCE, tends to represent the lowest common denominator. If there is not sufficient political will to set up or adapt a mandate in accordance with the needs of the political reality (for example, by defining what constitutes a ceasefire violation and a zone of disengagement, setting up an enforcement mechanism or allowing access to the geographical areas needed), those in charge must consider whether the lowest common denominator is (still) worth pursuing.

In this vein, whether monitoring officers should be armed or not depends on the context. A hybrid set-up, where unarmed civilian or military monitors observe a ceasefire while armed troops serve as a guarantee against sanction ceasefire violations, would be preferable to a situation where lightly-armed monitors are up against heavy weapons by themselves.

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<sup>32</sup> Verjee, “Ceasefire Monitoring under Fire.”

<sup>33</sup> Kostanyan Hrant and Stefan Meister, “Ukraine, Russia and the EU: Breaking the Deadlock in the Minsk Process,” CEPS 2016, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/ukraine-russia-and-eu-breaking-deadlock-minsk-process/>.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, former SMM leadership, 12 March 2025.easefire

<sup>35</sup> Interview, officials formerly working with the SMM, 2 April 2025.

## Lack of sanctions mechanism

The most dramatic design flaw in the way the Minsk Agreements set up the ceasefire that the mission was supposed to monitor was the lack of an agreed-upon sanctions mechanism in case of ceasefire violations. As a former member of the SMM pointed out in an interview, “it didn’t matter how many violations were recorded if there was no political follow-up.”<sup>36</sup> As outlined above, the presence or absence of such a mechanism is decisive in whether or not a ceasefire observation mission is useful.

In the SMM’s case, the lack of accountability went beyond the absence of a sanctions mechanism. The mission was tasked with the monitoring (“gather information and report on the security situation in the area of operation”<sup>37</sup>) and verification of violations of the Minsk Agreements (“establish and report facts in response to specific incidents and reports of incidents”<sup>38</sup>). The mission, however, did not cover the ‘attribution’ of ceasefire violations, meaning that, in the case of violations, the monitors did not determine which side was in the wrong. Some experts argue that attribution is not always necessary or even conducive for upholding a ceasefire,<sup>39</sup> and that it can be very difficult to establish attribution with certainty. However, in this particular case, with the glaring absence of a sanctions mechanism, attribution could have been helpful: “Although attributing incidents would likely have made it

**The presence or absence of a sanctions mechanism is decisive in whether or not a ceasefire observation mission is useful.**

more difficult for the SMM to operate, it might have indicated to the belligerent parties that there were consequences to ceasefire violations.”<sup>40</sup> Above all, it could have forced some accountability upon Russia.

In the absence of political or military consequences for ceasefire violations, significant pressure was put on the functioning of the mission itself, as a way to compensate for this baked-in lack of effective conflict resolution. This manifested itself in recurring debates about staff and equipment levels, which further diverted attention from the absence of the political will to adhere to the ceasefire. It also prompted the OSCE’s participating states to increase the number of monitors – an overcompensation that made them *feel* like they were “taking action,” while in reality, it was clear to all involved that no increase in personnel could patch up the inherent design flaw of not having a functioning mechanism to stop violence.

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<sup>36</sup> Interview, former SMM member, 27 February 2025.

<sup>37</sup> OSCE Permanent Council, “Decision No.1117” (Art. 3/1).

<sup>38</sup> OSCE Permanent Council, “Decision No.1117” (Art. 3/2).

<sup>39</sup> In Cate Buchanan, Govinda Clayton and Alexander Ramsbotham, “Ceasefire Monitoring: Developments and Complexities,” Conciliation Resources, July 2021, the authors note that “monitoring is better suited to building confidence and channels of communication than policing violations” (p.4), <https://www.c-r.org/accord/ceasefire-monitoring-developments-and-complexities>.

<sup>40</sup> Verjee, “Ceasefire Monitoring under Fire,” p. 812.

**Lessons:** We know now that it would be delusional to expect a ceasefire monitoring mission to successfully get Russia to comply with an agreement without setting up an accompanying mechanism to sanction ceasefire violations. The question is: will those setting up a future mission have the political will to sanction transgressions?

A civilian monitoring effort can observe ceasefire violations but cannot deter them. Given the higher buy-in of European countries into the war (as compared to 2014), we might conceive of a more robust sanctions mechanism – either backed by military force or via the coupling of ceasefire compliance to economic sanctions relief or reinforcement. Whether this would be sufficient to deter Russia from military action remains an open question. Contrary to the number of troops deployed, which matters greatly when discussing a robust European military presence, the number of human monitors for a ceasefire monitoring effort is far less crucial than the system to deter ceasefire violation and should therefore not be the focus of debate.

## Geographic scope

An additional challenge the SMM faced was the mission’s geographical scope. While the first Minsk Agreement included a clear provision for the monitoring of the internationally recognized border between Russia and Ukraine, this was removed in the second agreement. In theory, the SMM was mandated to operate in all of Ukraine; in practice, this was not the case. The mission operated on both sides of the line of contact in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, though access within the non-government controlled areas was frequently obstructed.<sup>41</sup> A separate OSCE Observer Mission monitored two border crossings in Gukovo and Donetsk until 2021, but its access even to these two points was severely impaired.<sup>42</sup> Satellite imagery enabled the mission to trace some of the movement of equipment and troops across the border, but certainly not all movement.<sup>43</sup>

Due to these limitations, the Russian government *de facto* “retained unilateral control of a 400-kilometer stretch of its 2,000-kilometer border with Ukraine, leaving the Ukrainian government unable to prevent the cross-border movement of people, troops, weapons, or funds.”<sup>44</sup> These constraints led to an overemphasis on monitoring areas under Ukrainian control, while the real conflict theater remained inaccessible.

In addition, Crimea was excluded from the outset of the negotiations, since Russia claimed it belonged to the Russian Federation – an argument the Kremlin is likely to employ again and expand to the four occupied and illegally annexed regions (Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia) of Ukraine today.

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<sup>41</sup> Umland, “Achievements and Limitations.”

<sup>42</sup> Umland, “Achievements and Limitations.”

<sup>43</sup> Hug, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology.”

<sup>44</sup> Hug, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology,” p.29.

**Lessons:** The SMM’s lack of oversight over the equipment and personnel crossing the Russian-Ukrainian border presented a “central security leak.” This limited geographical scope is likely to continue in any new mission, since Russia will probably not allow access to the areas currently occupied by Russia or to the parts of the Russian-Ukrainian border that do not overlap with the frontline (the same goes for the Belarussian-Ukrainian border). To make matters worse, Moscow could further demand that any future ceasefire line not be equivalent to the current frontline, but would follow the administrative boundary line of the four Ukrainian regions it illegally annexed (but only partially controls). European negotiators should be prepared for such demands and be ready to refuse them; they should request access to the entire geographical territory relevant to ceasefire monitoring. Any mission without such access would prove rather pointless.

# Mandate Implementation and Mission Management

## Finances and administration

The SMM was set up at great speed, with first monitors deployed in less than 24 hours after the approval of the SMM’s mandate.<sup>45</sup> From a political point of view, this was a great success for the OSCE, confirming its relevance and operational capacity. From an organizational point of view, however, interviewees stressed that a gradual set-up would have been more beneficial. While the SMM’s rapid deployment and expansion was deemed necessary, it was accompanied by challenges in establishing administrative and financial structures adequate to support its operations. These challenges were exacerbated by the fact that SMM had been set up prior to the war in Donbas and the associated expansion of the mission’s tasks and personnel.

The OSCE headquarters in Vienna, primarily focused on ensuring the swift deployment of monitors, lacked the capacity to provide robust organizational support.<sup>46</sup> In the words of one interviewee, the SMM was resembling a “start-up that couldn’t grow organically.”<sup>47</sup> For example, in 2016, the SMM managed to expend only 60% of its planned budget. At the same time, field teams faced financial constraints that limited their ability to conduct supplementary activities, such as events related to human rights promotion or local mediation initiatives. The situation improved over time, when more appropriate administrative structures were established in the monitoring teams in Donetsk and Luhansk and a Head of Administration and Finance was recruited to take charge of strategic financial planning in Kyiv.

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<sup>45</sup> Umland, “Achievements and Limitations.”

<sup>46</sup> Interview, former SMM staff, 27 February 2025.

<sup>47</sup> Interview, former SMM member, 06 March 2025.

**Lessons:** The experiences of previous missions such as the SMM highlight the inherent trade-off missions face: rapid deployment on the one hand and the establishment of robust operational structures on the other. Political imperatives will likely necessitate swift action, often before adequate systems are in place. Nevertheless, future missions would benefit from an initial deployment of a small, highly experienced core team tasked with essential functions, including administration, finance and political engagement with the host country. This core group would then be gradually expanded. To facilitate such an approach, European and other contributing states can proactively identify qualified personnel who can be deployed at short notice. Ideally, candidates for this core team would be pre-selected during the early stages of mission planning.

## Human resources and duty of care

Toward the end of its tenure, the SMM employed more than 1300 mission members, including almost 700 monitors from 44 OSCE participating states.<sup>48</sup> The SMM faced numerous challenges pertaining to human resources and the recruiting and retaining of staff. Some of these challenges were specific to the SMM, such as issues related to the presence of Russian staff, while others are well-known problems in crisis management and peacekeeping missions. In this section, we will discuss the mission's shortcomings regarding, specifically, (1) staff recruitment, (2) in-mission support to manage the risks of the conflict zone, (3) retaining staff, and (4) the presence of Russian nationals in the mission.

Firstly, the mission relied heavily on 'secondments' from participating states (the process whereby each participating state recruits candidates individually, as opposed to the mission recruiting staff directly). While this mechanism allowed for a swift deployment of staff, it resulted in imbalances in staff qualifications and experience. In the first few years of the mission, due to unclear job descriptions, overqualified personnel were sometimes deployed in roles requiring only limited expertise (such as driving armored vehicles). Meanwhile, specialists, particularly in areas like drone imagery analysis, were not available in the national secondment pools or not attracted by the limited salary options.

Secondments further created internal tensions due to disparities in pay and conditions, as some countries provided additional financial incentives, while others did not. Several interviewees positively emphasized the mix and diversity of monitors from various participating states but also stressed that the civil-military balance was heavily tilted in favor of former military staff. This, in turn, negatively impacted operations; for one, because it made a gender balance more difficult to achieve.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, active military staff – which would have had more specialized knowledge regarding different types of weapons systems – was not allowed to participate, further obstructing the recruitment of people with these highly specialized skills.<sup>50</sup>

Secondly, the level of risk that participating states were willing to face varied greatly (this was also the case within the SMM) and generally decreased after the death of a mission member in April 2017. Unlike military missions, where there is often a higher casualty tolerance, the SMM's civilian nature made additional fatalities potentially mission-ending. At the same time, relatively high-risk activities, such as patrols in remote and frontline communities as well as direct engagement with local populations, remained essential for accurate verification and contextual understanding of ceasefire violations. The overall security management structures

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<sup>48</sup> Umland, "Achievements and Limitations."

<sup>49</sup> Interview, former SMM member, 28 February 2025.

<sup>50</sup> Interview, officials formerly working with the SMM, 2 April 2025.

proved inadequate because “the SMM, and partly the seconding states, underestimated the extent of its duty of care responsibilities.”<sup>51</sup> The lack of preparation for and chaotic execution of the evacuation of SMM staff in 2022, which left several national staff members detained in Russian-occupied areas, while one local staff member died under Russian shelling in Kharkiv, underscore this.<sup>52</sup> Aware of these shortcomings, some participating states put additional limitations on the deployment of their seconded staff to high-risk areas, resulting in some monitors being re-called even as they were on patrol – which also hindered operations.<sup>53</sup>

Staff retention, thirdly, posed an additional problem. One factor was the absence of clear career development opportunities and organized training. Another was inadequate psycho-social support for staff, often working in high-risk areas, which caused significant health issues like burnout (experienced by up to 5% of the staff).<sup>54</sup> Moreover, a lack of internal oversight mechanisms and robust compliance structures made addressing underperformance or misconduct nearly impossible. Terminating seconded mission staff proved difficult due to political sensitivities and a lack of a clear, enforceable accountability framework.<sup>55</sup> Assigning low-performing staff to other teams or regions therefore became a common workaround.

**A lack of internal oversight mechanisms and robust compliance structures made addressing underperformance or misconduct nearly impossible.**

Finally, the presence of Russian monitors within the SMM hindered operations since many, if not all, were suspected of spying.<sup>56</sup> During interviews, it was suggested that other nationalities were also engaged in passing on information to the Kremlin, or to its proxy forces in Donetsk and Luhansk. Moscow, in turn, alleged that local staff members had given sensitive information to the Ukrainian armed forces<sup>57</sup> and several local staff members were detained under this pretext by Russia following the full-scale invasion.<sup>58</sup> These allegations undermined the mission’s credibility and heightened distrust.

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<sup>51</sup> Andreas Wittkowsky, “Preparing for Future OSCE Missions: Lessons from the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine,” in: Cornelius Friesendorf/Stefan Wolff (eds), *Russia’s War against Ukraine: Implications for the Future of the OSCE*, Hamburg 2022, p. 80-85, p.83.

<sup>52</sup> Christopher Miller and Stephanie Liechtenstein, “Inside the OSCE’s botched withdrawal from Ukraine,” *Politico*, 06 October 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/10/inside-the-osces-botched-withdrawal-from-ukraine>.

<sup>53</sup> Interview, former SMM leadership, 12 March 2025.

<sup>54</sup> Interview, former SMM staff, 10 March 2025.

<sup>55</sup> Interview, former SMM staff, 10 March 2025.

<sup>56</sup> Härtel et al., “The OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.”

<sup>57</sup> Hug, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology.”

<sup>58</sup> OSCE, “OSCE Chairman-in-Office and Secretary General strongly urge immediate release of OSCE officials detained for over 500 days in Donetsk and Luhansk,” 12 September 2023, <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/551758>.

**Lessons:** Any future mission needs to balance the need to rapidly deploy staff via the secondment mechanism with the positive effects of directly recruiting staff for specialized positions. Not only would this help better fit the right staff to certain positions, it would also increase the mission's sense of responsibility for its staff. Proper staff development, psychological support structures and effective compliance mechanisms are crucial for ensuring staff retention. The SMM's experience also highlights that any state that is party to a conflict should not contribute staff to its ceasefire mission.

It is also key to note that keeping Russia out of a mission does not automatically mean it no longer is able to influence mission members of other nationality. Data security and information sharing on a "need to know" basis are extremely important in this regard. Finally, comprehensive risk management requires clear decision-making frameworks, consistent dialogue between operational and security teams, and a shared understanding of acceptable risk levels. Any future deployment would also require security guarantees, from both Russia and Ukraine, that mission members are not a target of hostile activities.

## Leadership

The above-mentioned lack of structures, terms of engagement and mission implementation plan also posed a problem for the mission's leadership. Those in charge created complex leadership structures as a way to deal with the immense pressure to perform in a challenging security environment – a pressure further compounded by a lack of political will to implement a ceasefire. At one point, there were more than eight hierarchical layers between a monitoring officer and the OSCE Headquarters in Vienna. This created bottlenecks and slowed down decision-making processes.

Given that much of the mandate was vague and open to interpretation, it came down to individuals to define it, making mission success dependent on individual initiative rather than a consistent approach. Another issue was that learning from other missions was difficult. The large scope of the SMM, unprecedented within the OSCE structure, created the belief among leadership that the mission was unique and could not learn from other OSCE or UN missions.<sup>59</sup> Practical challenges, such as a limited possibility to share internal mission protocols across organizations, further hindered learning, even where there was willingness.<sup>60</sup> Internally, the absence of consistent feedback mechanisms and the lack of intra-mission learning structures meant that many lessons learned were either not shared or lost over time, contributing to inefficiencies and missed opportunities for improvement.<sup>61</sup>

In this way, the SMM is a classic example of a "temporality trap": a mission of this kind is always planned to be operational only for one year (and mandated and budgeted as such), which disincentivizes the creation of formal knowledge management or learning units, sabotaging the long-term success of the mission.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Georg Albers and Lukasz Mackiewicz, "Localised Dialogue and Ceasefires: Lessons from the OSCE Engagement in Ukraine 2014-2022," 2024, Paper Presented at the Annual Conference 2024 of the Conflict Research Society in Edinburgh, UK, not publicly available.

<sup>60</sup> Interview, former SMM member, 28 February 2025.

<sup>61</sup> Albers and Mackiewicz, "Localised Dialogue and Ceasefires."

<sup>62</sup> Thorsten Benner, Stephan Mergenthaler, Philipp Rotmann, "The New World of UN Peace Operations: Learning to Build Peace?," *Oxford University Press*, 2011.



**Lessons:** Any future mission requires a more structured approach to leadership development, clear communication and a better focus on organizational learning – both from other missions in the OSCE, EU and UN context and within the mission itself (including continuous knowledge management and feedback loops). Moreover, those in charge must have a clear vision and set of priorities that are understood and respected by all staff members.

## Engagement with the local population

Both the Minsk Agreements and the Special Monitoring Mission were notoriously unpopular in Ukraine, which hampered the mission’s operations and now has the effect of dampening Kyiv’s appetite for a similar mission in the future. In particular in Donbas, the mission’s lack of a professional outreach strategy caused difficulties. The internal lack of clarity regarding the mandate meant that monitors were not able to sufficiently explain the objectives of the mission to the Ukrainian population (particularly in the zones around the line of contact). The local population had high expectations of the mission, hoping monitors would manage the conflict in ways it was neither capable of nor authorized for.<sup>63</sup> These expectations, coupled with great frustration about the ongoing violent hostilities, often led to the affected civilian population critiquing the mission and at times verbally attacking monitors.<sup>64</sup>

Local ceasefires, negotiated by SMM and referred to as “windows of silence,” were a notable exception to the rule. These local arrangements were put in place to achieve mostly humanitarian ends, such as repairing critical infrastructure located at the line of contact or facilitating access for humanitarian action. Civilian engagement and access to local communities, including to those in the non-government controlled parts of Donetsk and Luhansk, were crucial to facilitating the mission’s operations. These localized mediation efforts were and will be essential to facilitating future ceasefire implementation.<sup>65</sup>

**Lessons:** Any future mission must engage and set up strategic communication with the Ukrainian population living on both sides of the frontline (or the Russian population, in case the monitoring of the Russian-Ukrainian international border is part of a future mission).

Moreover, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine is perhaps the best-documented war in history, with many citizens digitally capturing military activity and uploading this evidence onto online platforms. Any future ceasefire monitoring should extend its reach by taking into account the local population (near the frontline or a zone of disengagement) – and their smartphones.<sup>1</sup> They should be factored into a monitoring strategy, both to increase local acceptance and to counter mis- and disinformation. An online platform where citizens can upload information (which is subsequently verified) could be one option to implement this. Such efforts would, however, need to be designed carefully to effectively deal with the risk of manipulation.

<sup>63</sup> Härtel et al., “The OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.”

<sup>64</sup> Lukasz Mackiewicz, “More than Counting Ceasefire Violations – the Human Dimension within the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine,” In: IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2018, 2019*, pp.181-191.

<sup>65</sup> Interview, former SMM member, 28 February 2025.

## Technology

The SMM employed a range of technological tools for monitoring and verification to complement the human monitors, to some extent pioneering their use in a civilian mission.<sup>66</sup> Over the course of its existence, the SMM deployed different types of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), static cameras, satellite images, and acoustic sensors along the extensive front line. Located in hotspots and other places of interest, cameras provided a record of whether ceasefire violations had occurred; in 2020 and 2021, up to 33% of all ceasefire violations were registered through cameras, respectively.<sup>67</sup> Satellite imagery also proved very useful in tracing the gradual movement of military positions.<sup>68</sup> Using these technologies, the mission was able to be (partially) present in some section of the line of contact at all times. However, the technology they employed also became a target, in particular for the Russian proxy forces in Donetsk and Luhansk. Electronic warfare was used to jam UAV signals and disable aerial surveillance, while ground cameras were destroyed or disabled.

The SMM's experience shows both the uses and limits of technology: while it allowed the mission to expand its radius, the vast amount of generated information had to be collected, analyzed and stored by mission members and then made available to patrols.<sup>69</sup> As technology advanced, the mission increasingly found itself grappling with the magnitude of generated data and facing data management challenges.<sup>70</sup> Similar to discussions about staff resources, the bottom line remains that technology alone could not overcome the political shortcomings and lack of political will to adhere to a ceasefire.

**Lessons:** The SMM's experience suggests that technology is a complementary monitoring tool, useful for documenting particular types of ceasefire violation in a (partially) permissive context.<sup>1</sup> The specialized skills necessary for proper data management (drone imagery analysis, for instance) are mostly found among the military – an argument in favor of turning a future mission into a civilian-military effort.<sup>1</sup> Above all, the SMM shows that monitoring, verification and attribution solely through technological means<sup>1</sup> is not a feasible option for the future. Technology cannot substitute the contextual understanding and human nuance that direct monitoring provides; it holds value as a *complement* to human monitors.

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<sup>66</sup> Andreas Wittkowsky, "Human or Machine? Lessons from the Use of Technology in the Monitoring Mission to Ukraine," IPI Global Observatory, April 2021, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2021/04/lessons-from-use-of-technology-in-monitoring-mission-ukraine/>.

<sup>67</sup> OSCE SMM, "2021 Trends and Observations"; OSCE SMM, "2020 Trends and Observations," 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/8/476809.pdf>.

<sup>68</sup> Hug, "Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology."

<sup>69</sup> Hug, "Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology."

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

# Lessons

Ultimately, “human monitors ... cannot compensate for the shortcomings of imperfect agreements or the lack of political will.”<sup>71</sup> The SMM’s experience shows that European states need to first ask themselves what they are willing to invest, and then consider which instrument is fit for this purpose – not the other way around.

If the goal is to guarantee Ukraine’s and Europe’s long-term security, a ceasefire monitoring mission (by itself) is not the right tool; Russia is unlikely to agree to a ceasefire agreement that is, in effect, more favorable to Ukraine than the Minsk Agreements.

**Ceasefire monitoring can be a useful tool if non-adherence to the ceasefire leads to serious consequences in the economic or military sphere.**

However, ceasefire monitoring can be a useful tool if non-adherence to the ceasefire leads to serious consequences in the economic or military sphere. In that case, ceasefire monitoring, which may be the lowest common denominator solution that is politically possible (despite its temporary nature and other serious shortcomings), can be worth pursuing.

If this is the case, European leaders should consider some of the following lessons for negotiating a mission, setting it up and implementing it effectively, as discussed throughout this policy brief.

## **Based on the experiences of the Minsk Agreements:**

- Negotiators should signal their preparedness to halt negotiations. If the only deal that can be reached with Russia is worse than the status quo (i.e., the absence of any agreement), they should be ready to walk away. Whether a lowest common denominator solution is worth it needs to be constantly re-evaluated.
- If an agreement is reached, the corresponding document should ideally be as short and unambiguous as possible. The text should be supplemented with a detailed technical annex to avoid contradictory interpretations of any of the reached decisions and sidestep stalling from Moscow over technical details.
- European leaders should prepare effective ‘sticks and carrots,’ with which they can counter and block Russian spoiler tactics during negotiations.

## **Distilled from our analysis of the SMM set-up:**

- A broad and flexible mandate can be useful, but only if the states mandating a mission, and the staff working for the mission, all have a relatively similar understanding of the mission’s purpose and scope. The regular revision of a mandate can help to continuously assess whether a mission is still fulfilling its intended purpose.
- For a mission to be useful, a robust mechanism to sanction ceasefire violations must be in place. This mechanism should be set up prior to the launch of the mission.
- The geographic scope of a mission should expressly include all areas relevant to ceasefire observation. If it is not possible for a mission to gain access to certain relevant areas, including the internationally recognized border between Russia and Ukraine, this can be an argument not to pursue a mission at all.

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<sup>71</sup> Hug, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology,” p.11.

### **From the SMM's mandate implementation:**

- Those setting up a new mission should first deploy a small group which covers the mission's core functions. Over time, this group would be gradually expanded upon. Reaching a high total number of deployed staff should be far less important than the mission set-up (sanctions mechanism, mandate, scope).
- Professional finance and HR capacity, adequate risk management, psychological support structures, and functioning compliance are crucial for staff retention.
- Feedback mechanisms and institutional learning – within a mission and from other missions – are of critical importance for success.
- Strategic communications toward and with the local population is essential. Due to negative experiences with past missions, any future civilian monitoring effort will undoubtedly be unpopular in Ukraine. Local mediation efforts can increase acceptance for a ceasefire and for a potential monitoring mission.
- While technology can be a useful complementary tool, monitoring and verification requires human monitors for contextual understanding and nuance.

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