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NATO turned 70, but no solutions on the horizon for the Eastern Flank's crisis

On the 4th of April, NATO turned 70. It was a birthday that not only meant an evident and historical landmark for the Euro-Atlantic politico-military alliance, but also continued a strategic debate over the current strengths, weaknesses and purpose of the Alliance's geopolitical role in the international system. Of the several events and celebrations held on the 70th anniversary, the most significant was the speech given by NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Washington. Stoltenberg's intervention—the first time a NATO SG addressed the U.S. Congress—was marked by a realist approach and geared towards strengthening the bond with Washington, in the attempt of pushing aside the clouds of criticism and doubt coming from across the Atlantic over the current role of the organization.

After tracing the historical landmarks of the Alliance, Stoltenberg touched upon the '*unprecedented challenges*' that the Alliance is currently facing. Besides international terror, the cyber threat and the shift in the global balance of power, the Secretary General dwelt at length on Russia's assertive policies, namely in Georgia and especially in Ukraine.

Indeed, seventy years after its foundation and thirty years after the end of the Cold War, one of the main security and geopolitical conundrums lies in the Alliance's troubled Eastern region, where a coherent and shared policy orientation vis-à-vis Russia is yet to be found. The Alliance's expansion eastwards, on the one hand constituted one of its most remarkable achievements in the post-Cold War era—sealed with the recent inclusion into the club of the North Republic of Macedonia—on the other it created a security dilemma. This implies that the more one geopolitical actor expands its sphere of influence to bolster its status and provide security to new aspiring allies, the more it produces, as a reaction, growing strains with another opposing geopolitical force who feels its own security jeopardized.

So far, the situation with Moscow over certain contested Eastern European borders has turned into a long-time stalemate, often nourished by the propagation of so-called frozen conflicts and their relative

de facto states. This state of affairs saw no real evolution, little improvements if any, besides the traditional two-track policy of eastwards expansion flanked by a constant dialogue with the Kremlin.

More than that, no established mechanism for a long-standing de-escalation and geopolitical arrangement have been sketched out. At this stage, what is safe to say is that a plausible *modus vivendi* will not be reached only through external game-changers and macro-geopolitics, but also through the internal political-institutional evolution (or involution) that Russia, and other former Soviet states, will possibly undertake in the years to come.

The recent elections in Ukraine, which had the outsider Volodymyr Zelens'kyj victorious over the incumbent president Petro Poroshenko, are in this respect significant. "While I am not formally president yet, as a citizen of Ukraine I can tell all post-Soviet countries: Look at us! Everything is possible!". That was the subtle message the actor-turned-president sent to post-Soviet countries in his victory speech, Russia of course included. Regardless of the future outcome of Zelens'kyj's presidency—most importantly in the fight against corruption, oligarchs, and the war in the Donbass—his election showed a great deal about how established Ukraine's affection with democracy is, and, despite the country's structural issues, how democratic roots have grown steadily in such a troubled post-Soviet state.

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