

09.12.2014 Keep an eye on Eastern Europe.

Peace is a fragile commodity, which, in Ukraine, is increasingly under threat. After Crimea, effectively now tied to Russia, all of the russophone territories are rebelling against the central powers in Kiev and serving the Russian expansionist policy of Vladimir Putin.

It extends as far as Moldova, where, in Transnistria, the “russophones”, i.e. the Russian-speaking parts of the population, whose presence is largely a result of the Soviet empire, are in the majority. This Russian-speaking influence actually ranges across the entirety of the northern seaboard of the Black Sea, including Odessa, which is Ukraine’s major port.

“The Moldovan elections saw pro-European parties achieve a majority,” announced the media this weekend. But that majority is a coalition, and divisions in the population were confirmed at the ballots. The editorial optimism is in danger of being very short-lived, and the Moldovan poll is a new encouragement to the hardliners within the Moscow leadership.

By applying pressure to an easily manipulated formal democracy, Vladimir Putin could potentially annex the south-eastern third of Ukraine and the whole of eastern Moldova, thus forming a continuous territory right on the doorstep of Europe, and assuming complete control of access to the Black Sea. The stakes are clearly very high.

How can this be prevented? Or, more to the point, how can this expansionism be restricted without entering into a devastating frontier conflict? Because the airliner that crashed last summer, shot down by a missile strike that was almost certainly intentional, demonstrated that a very real war could ensue from the “limited conflict” we’ve seen so far.

Europe’s weapon of choice is economic sanctions, measuring out the effects on the Russian economy: sufficient, or at least that’s the hope, to dissuade its leaders from engaging in the act of war that the annexation of further territories after Crimea would constitute, but not to the extent of setting off a mechanism of reprisals of which the economic cost would be too high. Putin set the tone when he threatened to ban European airlines from flying over Siberia to get to Asia. The costs incurred by those airlines would effectively eliminate Air France, Lufthansa and the like from this essential market which is seeing increasingly heated competition from companies based in the Gulf and even China. The dire consequences for those airlines are as certain as the woes of France’s SNCF!

In addition, the exercise is being held back by France. The issue: how to not deliver the ultra-modern war ships ordered by Russia, given that those very boats would give Russia an essential naval advantage in the conquest of the Black Sea ports. Paris is trying to buy time, but really only wants one outcome: a diplomatic lull that would enable the contract signed by the state shipbuilders to be honoured.

The West has also wielded a new economic weapon with the aid of OPEC, and hence the Americans. The decision made at the most recent OPEC summit, to allow the falling oil prices to carry on by continuing to flood the market with crude from the Middle East oilfields, is changing the geopolitical playing field. Because the biggest victim of the falling prices is Russia, whose economic and financial strength depends overwhelmingly on its oil resources. Experts have determined that the fall in oil prices has already had twice as much economic impact in Russia as the European financial sanctions. And it’s not over, since the fall in oil prices suits virtually everyone except the Russians, at least in the short term: the Saudis themselves, who are thus choking the competition, notably that from shale oil or new, deeper oil fields which are more expensive to exploit; the Europeans, for whom this slowdown in oil prices is an economic oxygen bubble to get out of the financial crisis; and perhaps even the Americans, who are reaching saturation point in terms of the ecological impact of extracting shale gas and oil, which the fall in oil prices will necessarily limit.

Western diplomacy’s gamble is that negotiations will rapidly catch up with the military escalation, to arrive at a durable peace agreement between Russia and Europe. And it may be a reasonable hope, bearing in mind that the economic pressure mechanisms put in place do seem to be dissuasive when it comes to a conflict initiated by Russia extending beyond the current pressure points.

But a channel for negotiations needs to be opened quickly. The Council of Europe, on which sit all the members of the European Union as well as Ukraine, Russia and Moldova, seems well-suited, and that’s the message that Pope Francis conveyed on his recent visit to Strasbourg. A message relayed to the Orthodox Church, which is very influential in the higher echelons of the Russian state, and with whom a common front has been announced to fight against Islamic fundamentalism from the Middle East, which is a threat to all other religious communities. The Council of Europe has developed a corpus of texts and treaties to protect the rights of minorities. Furthermore, abolition of some of these texts by the new Ukrainian government was at the origin of the revolt by the russophone populations of the country, as well as the anxiety of Hungarian and Romanian minorities who live on the western borders of the country. This then is a credible channel for all the parties.

All these evolutions are possible, but no one has yet made a move. In Ukraine, anything could still occur.