

Recognition on Condition of Referendum (RCR).

A framework for a lasting solution in Donbass

1 Summary

The framework is based on the principle that lasting peace cannot be achieved by freezing a conflict or relying on trust that does not exist. Mechanisms must be established that solve fundamental problems and build trust in the process.

The core idea is that Russia receives a symbolic and legal victory through conditional recognition, where Ukraine in return demands that popular legitimacy be clarified through a transparent and internationally monitored election. This combination creates an incentive system where both parties must demonstrate a form of national confidence regarding the people's support in the disputed region. This, in turn, weighs on both sides to allow such an election.

At the same time, and on the other hand, there are ethical implications of refusing such a solution: If one does not believe that the people in the region are on their side, and refuses to let a third party organize the election, then the exercise of power aimed at forcing the region under one's administration is delegitimized. Today, the situation is unclear, and both sides believe that Donbass should be under their administration.

Neutrality is considered a prerequisite in this framework. We elaborate on why, and what kind of neutrality we are thinking of. Neutrality can be a strong position, and does not have to be a loss or submission. We see this as uncontroversial, because it is fundamentally sensible to have buffer zones between nuclear powers, in a world organized around strategic nuclear balance.

Below is a bullet list of how the process towards peace might look, which is further elaborated in the proposal:

- Ukraine remains neutral, but this must be set in a context where it does not mean capitulation and weakness, but instead provides strategic strength, by being a link for future trade and relations between east and west.
- Conditional recognition: Russia receives recognition of control of Donbas, in exchange for a fair election within (e.g.) 12 months.
- Binding referendum: Both parties commit in advance to respect the outcome of a referendum.
- Guarantee panel and process: A broadly composed panel of neutral countries (i.e., as neutral as possible) ensures election organization, security, and auditing. [this is a discussion point]
- Election security and transparency: Garrisoned military presence, secure polling stations, open publication, and third-party auditing to prevent fraud.
- Establish a mechanism to secure voting rights in exile, as well as protection against

election fraud in exile (negotiation point on the degree and type of security needed)

- Economic mechanisms: Escrow and peace funds make the agreement self-sustaining, and snapback mechanisms ensures response in case of breach.
- Galtung-inspired framework: Language and minority rights, memorial commission, and long-term institutionalized dialogue to build positive peace.

2 Background and Context

In this framework, the status of Donbass is understood as the critical root problem that must be resolved in order to clarify the subsequent conflict dynamics. The historical core issue can be traced back to 1994, when the coal miners' four demands were rejected during the establishment of Ukraine's national assembly (Rada).

This became a symbolic and practical break between the central authority and the region's industrial and linguistic identity. Later claims of ultranationalism, the need for de-nazification, and changes in governance have largely arisen as expressions of the unresolved status of Donbass.

Older historical circumstances – such as Stalin's integration of Donbass into Ukraine and Khrushchev's transfer of Crimea – form the background but belong to a geopolitical order that no longer exists. From a modern perspective, the transition from the Soviet Commonwealth to sovereign state governance in 1991, and the formation of the parliament in 1994, are the most relevant starting points for understanding the current structure of the conflict.

The RCR model (Recognition on Condition of Referendum) seeks to resolve this by establishing a mechanism whereby Donbass is temporarily recognized as Russian-administered territory, in exchange for an internationally administered and triple-verified referendum within twelve months after the agreement is reached. The approach is based on the principle that popular sovereignty precedes national sovereignty, and that the question of Donbass' status was never clearly resolved after 1991. The Minsk II process attempted to answer

The Minsk II process attempted to address this, but was hindered by time pressure and breaches of the agreed timeline. The goal is therefore not to design a "new Minsk agreement," but to resolve the central question underlying both Minsk agreements, regarding what kind of affiliation Donbass itself desires.

As the conflict has now escalated to involve the USA, Russia, and the EU, a lasting solution must not only depend on dialogue between Russia and Ukraine, but also on these peripheral parties contributing to creating a context in which both sides can agree on peace, in a way that is advantageous for both parties.

The RCR proposal sees the start of a solution through an internationally verified referendum under zero-trust conditions as a key measure. Through gradual implementation, mutual control, and transparent mechanisms, the process can build a minimum of trust and institutional cooperation between the parties – which in turn can

form the basis for a stable and lasting peace, in a context that the USA, EU, and NATO can collaborate on making attractive for both parties.

2.1 International aspects

The model accounts for security, legitimacy, economic stability, and institutional robustness through a phased process, led by a guarantor panel and supported by established international institutions such as the UN's Department of Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Bank for International Settlements (BIS) and Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA).

The framework also seeks, at an overarching level, to find methods that reduce the risk of future blocs coming into conflict with each other. A multipolar world seems to be emerging, and the way we resolve conflicts today will help shape the future global security model.

Although the situation seems hopeless now due to geostrategic complexities, claims, and considerations, it is precisely in this climate that we can develop the tools we need to reduce geostrategic hotspots in the future, lower the risk, and establish lasting peace.

2.2 Basic Assumptions

The model assumes Ukraine as a future neutral nation. Not as a result of political considerations specifically for Ukraine, or due to Russian demands, but as a pragmatic necessity for a world where peace depends on a balance of terror via nuclear weapons, with Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) as the safeguard against any nuclear power initiating the first nuclear attack.

Unfortunately, it is absolutely necessary to keep nuclear powers separated from each other with buffer countries and regions, to take the necessary responsibility that comes with having created a world with nuclear weapons. This is the most fundamental aspect of securing the world against all-destroying nuclear war.

But neutral status should come in exchange for a better situation than what one would have as part of a bloc. In this proposal, it is suggested that Ukraine receives official status as a link between east and west, where the blocs commit to placing Ukraine in an advantageous role between them. In practice, this means being helped from both sides to become a trading metropolis, which can also maintain relational and diplomatic ties between east and west, and thus profit from ensuring stability in the region through a beneficial – and dignified – neutrality.

2.3 Why previous processes failed

Previous attempts (Minsk I/II and the Istanbul talks) assumed a degree of mutual trust that was not present. Ceasefires were in practice used for regrouping and rearmament,

and political commitments were not operationalized with sufficient verification and automatic consequences. The result was that delays were rewarded. A lasting arrangement must therefore function in a zero-trust environment, where compliance is ensured through technical mechanisms and predefined, transparent consequences – not by assumptions of goodwill.

2.4 Zero-trust as a premise

The RCRframework is designed to function without the parties needing to trust each other. Trust is built during the process through small symbolic acts and will become relevant over time, but the starting point is: (a) public and verifiable data access, (b) third-party verification in key areas (elections, security, economic milestones), and (c) automatic "snapback" mechanisms if indicators show violations. This reduces the gains from tactical delay and covert remilitarization.

2.5 Four stabilizing prerequisites

Security. The arrangement must reduce perceived strategic risk for all parties. This requires clear restrictions on military activity in defined zones, verifiable procedures for risk incidents (e.g., around nuclear power plants), and communication between military contact points.

Legitimacy. A final status that is not socially accepted will be challenged. A controlled and independently administered popular vote provides a verifiable foundation that can be accepted both internally and externally.

Economic incentive for compromise. Peace solutions that allow for growth and investment have greater survivability. A framework where Ukraine can function as a stable point of interaction between larger economic blocs creates incentives that outweigh the gains from continued rivalry. This incentive requires Russia and transatlantic actors to cooperate in creating a favorable position for Ukraine.

Institutional robustness. Rights related to language, local governance, legal protection, and cultural representation should be secured through independent mechanisms (ombudsman, court access, external monitoring) to prevent new mobilization.

2.6 Geopolitical transition and risk of bloc formation

The conflict unfolds in a phase of global transformation, where new economic and political coalitions are emerging alongside an established Western system. Without inclusive and predictable arrangements, regional conflicts can become arenas for system rivalry and arms race cycles.

A solution must also work under multipolar conditions, and in this way one can be ahead of new and potentially even more serious confrontations during the ongoing transition.

2.7 Donbass as a locally anchored conflict zone

Donbass is an area that has in practice been caught by slowly built-up global tensions. To achieve lasting stability, the solution must both respond to realities on the ground and contribute to de-escalation in the broader dynamics that have made the region vulnerable. A controlled and internationally secured process that clarifies local will can simultaneously serve as an example of how rival spheres can find stability without new bloc formation.

2.8 Theory of peace

A persistent problem in many peace processes is the notion that peace must simultaneously be experienced as "just" based on a specific value foundation. In conflicts driven by strong identity or value tensions – such as in Ukraine – the concept of justice will be understood very differently depending on which normative frame of reference is applied. If the peace process is tied to value-based demands for justice, there is a risk of reintroducing the conflict's ideological frontlines into the very architecture of peace.

Johan Galtung therefore emphasized the importance of so-called "surplus solutions" – alternatives that not only weigh losses and gains but create a new space of gain that transcends the conflict's original dichotomy. Such solutions can arise when the parties move away from binary positions and instead identify areas where mutual benefit is possible, for example through economic cooperation, cultural autonomy, or security policy guarantees that reduce perceived existential risk.

A realistic peace will therefore often involve compromises that do not appear completely fair to any of the parties in isolation, but which collectively provide greater security, welfare, and autonomy than continued conflict. This requires a structure where both parties see greater benefit in participating than in staying outside, and where third parties also contribute to frameworks that make such a solution attractive and verifiable.

The RCR framework seeks to operationalize such a superior solution by shifting the center of the conflict from value-based disagreement to an institutionally anchored choice of future, through security guarantees, economic incentives, and a controlled popular mandate.

3 Core Proposal

3.1 Conditional Recognition

The RCRmodel starts with a conditional, temporary recognition of Russian control over

the Donbass region. This recognition takes effect immediately upon signing the agreement, but is legally conditional on an internationally verified popular vote being held within 12 months. The recognition functions as an incentive for Russia to participate in the process, while Ukraine's position is safeguarded through a nullity clause: if the process is interrupted, manipulated, or rejected by the verification body, the recognition automatically lapses and the agreement is suspended.

3.2 Binding Popular Vote

A referendum is held organized and monitored by the guarantor panel in cooperation with the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) and the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross).

The voter register is based on: (a) residents as of January 1, 2014, and their descendants, and (b) documented residents between 2014 and 2022. Displaced persons receive voting rights through dedicated polling stations at embassies and ICRC offices. The election result becomes binding if at least 60% of eligible voters participate and at least 55% vote for one option. The options shall include: (A) affiliation with Ukraine with treaty-guaranteed autonomy, (B) an independent neutral region within Ukraine, or (C) accession to Russia. During negotiations, it may be discussed whether the region should also have option (D) an independent neutral region within Russia.

3.3 Guarantee Panel

An international guarantee panel is established to ensure implementation. The panel should consist of countries trusted in both Eastern and Western spheres, for example Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Egypt, South Africa, Turkey, and Austria.

Finding this panel will be the main focus of the negotiations. All parties must feel that their interests are represented through the panel. This means there must be nations that lean partially in one direction, and some that can be said to be genuinely neutral.

The panel is responsible for:

- organizing the election in cooperation with OSCE and UNDP
- ensuring physical calm during the process through a temporary observation force
- verifying the voting process via independent auditing firms and academic institutions
- assessing any complaints and approving or annulling the result.

3.4 Economic Mechanisms

An international escrow arrangement is established, administered through the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) or a similar neutral financial institution.

Sanction reliefs, investment packages, and reconstruction funds are released in phases after confirmed milestones. In the event of documented breach of the agreement, an automatic snapback mechanism is activated where funds are frozen and sanctions reinstated.

3.5 Implementation and consequences

The result of the referendum takes effect within 90 days after approval. Minority rights are ensured through an independent ombuds institution appointed by the guarantor panel.

If the vote does not meet the criteria, the process is annulled and negotiations must be resumed before a repetition. This ensures that no party can manipulate the process without consequences.

4 Implementation and institutional structure

4.1 Introduction

To ensure feasibility in an environment characterized by low mutual trust, the implementation of the agreement must take place stepwise. Each phase must be traceable, verifiable, and linked to clear criteria before the next step is activated. This makes the process robust against attempts at stalling or unilateral advantage-taking.

4.2 Phase overview

Below is a principled phase overview illustrating a possible progression towards a lasting solution. The outline is not intended as a predetermined agreement, but as a concrete starting point for negotiations and further development. Such a structure can help clarify operational steps, identify negotiation space, and clarify which elements require sequential implementation. With this as a framework, a proposed starting point for a negotiation-driven process is presented.

Phase	Purpose	Measures	Institutions	Verification	Goal
0a	Stop escalation and protect civilians	Energy ceasefire: No attacks on civilian energy infrastructure (electricity, gas, and nuclear power)	OSCE, IAEA	OSCE reports, UAV surveillance	Stable energy infrastructure
0b	Establish framework for negotiations	Formal opening of negotiations	UN DPPA	Reported progress	Framework agreement concluded
0c	Building fundamental trust	Extended ceasefire with testing of logistics verification	OSCE, ICRC	Controlled logistics access	Ceasefire maintained
I	Legal activation	Signing and conditional recognition	Guarantor panel	Published agreement	Recognition takes effect
II	Infrastructure and security	Establishment of electoral bodies and security zones	OSCE, UNDP	Reported election infrastructure	Ready for voting
III	Clarification of local will	Plebiscite conducted and verified	OSCE, UNDP	Election report and audit	Approved result

IV	Implementation	Implementation of election results	Guarantee panel	Milestone verification	Political implementation
V	Long-term stabilization	Ombudsman apparatus and normalization	OSCE, UN	Annual evaluations	Stable peace

4.3 International Governance Structure

To ensure balance and legitimacy in the process, a multi-layered institutional framework is established. No single actor is given control over the entire process, but all key parties are granted insight and defined participation. The structure is designed to prevent dominance, build trust through transparency, and ensure professional quality at all levels.

Level	Role	Primary actor	Comment
Overall political governance	Approve milestones and trigger phase transitions	Guarantee panel	Composed of balanced, recognized states
Strategic coordination	Ensure coherence between security, choices, and economy UN DPPA	UN DPPA	Mandate for political peace facilitation
Technical election organization election observation	Establish registers and procedures	OSCE ODIHR, UNDP Election Assistance	ODIHR has experience with election observation
Security and surveillance	Ceasefire, UAV surveillance, and demilitarized zones	OSCE (SMM-like missions)	In cooperation with ICRC for logistics verification
Humanitarian and social protection	Diaspora access, humanitarian support and security	ICRC, UNHCR	Important in phases 0C–III
Financial control	Escrow system and milestone-based release	BIS	IMF and the World Bank as observers
Legal backstop	Arbitration and breach management	PCA (Permanent Court of Arbitration)	Activated in case of procedural conflict

Information flow occurs from operational entities to the UN DPPA, which compiles status and provides recommendations to the guarantor panel. The panel makes decisions on transitioning to the next phase based on verified information. Quarterly public reports ensure international transparency.

4.4 Security and Monitoring Mechanisms

The security dimension must be technically verifiable to create a stable foundation for popular support and political implementation. The goal is not to establish permanent

international control, but to protect the civilian population and prevent escalation in critical phases.

4.4.1 OSCE-led Observation Force

An observation force led by the OSCE is established, based on the experiences from the Special Monitoring Mission (2014–2022), but technologically upgraded. The force is mandated to monitor the ceasefire, report violations in real time, and cooperate with the ICRC in logistics verification in phase 0C.

It is important here to be able to determine who is breaking the ceasefire, thereby giving moral high ground to the party that complies with its obligations.

4.4.2 UAV and Sensor Technology

UAV and sensor networks are used for continuous monitoring of demilitarized zones. The OSCE has previously used such systems in Ukraine; this experience is further developed for higher precision and independence.

4.4.3 IAEA Role

The IAEA is given responsibility for monitoring nuclear power plants, especially Zaporizhzhia (ZNPP), to prevent sabotage or risky activities that could escalate the conflict.

4.4.4 Joint Incident Review Unit (JIRU)

A multilateral review unit (JIRU) is established for the rapid handling of alleged violations. The unit shall assess incidents within 48 hours and recommend measures to the UN DPPA and the guarantor panel.

4.4.5 Demilitarized zones

During Phase II–III, defined demilitarized areas are established, especially near polling stations and transit centers. All military units are barracked with a registered personnel list during the election.

These mechanisms are not intended to replace a political solution but to ensure that the population can express their will under stable and secure conditions.

4.5 Dispute resolution mechanisms

Effective handling of disputes during the process is crucial to prevent escalation and ensure progress. The arrangement must be fast, scalable, and understandable, with defined levels of responsibility and consequence frameworks.

Level	Situation Type	Treatment	Instance	Deadline
1	Technical disagreements over procedures	Operational clarification	UN DPPA	Within 48 hours
2	Limited breaches of the agreement	Quick Assessment	JIRU + OSCE	Within 72 hours
3	Serious or repeated violations	Political assessment and possible sanctions	Guarantor panel	Within 7 days

Level	Situation Type	Treatment	Instance	Deadline
4	Systemic Sabotage or Dispute as to the Basis of the Agreement	International Arbitration	PCA (The Hague)	Final Decision

Conflicts in the process must be handled before they develop into conflicts about the process. If the PCA or the Guarantor Panel determines a violation, snapback mechanisms are activated. All decisions are published in summary form to ensure transparency.

4.6.4 Limitations

- No veto over phase transitions.
- No decision-making authority in the Guarantor Panel.
- Lack of cooperation can trigger snapback measures and suspension of the agreement process.

The roles are designed to balance the need for the parties' ownership in the process with the requirement for an internationally verified and independent implementation structure.

4.7 Handling of sabotage and breaches

The process must be robust against attempts at sabotage or strategic training. The handling of violations follows a graded response model that is adapted to severity and intent.

Level	Type of violation	Action	Instance
Low	Technical or delaying non-conformities with no strategic effect	Corrective orders UN DPPA	UN DPPA
Moderate	Actions Affecting Phase Goal or Observation	Temporary Suspension of Progress	Guarantor Panel
Severe	Systemic Sabotage with the Intent to Destroy the Process	Snapback, Reconsideration of the Agreement	Guarantor Panel + PCA

The system is designed to ensure that failure does not lead to collapse, but to a controlled response that maintains the integrity of the process.

4.7.1 Long-term consolidation and normalisation

The aim of the consolidation phase is to transfer governance and responsibility to local authorities under a safe framework, while at the same time phasing out international support in a controlled manner. Stability must be measured in terms of political, economic and social sustainability capacity.

4.7.2 Gradual reduction of international presence

Once the will of the people is implemented and institutional guarantees work in practice, the operational role of the OSCE and the UN DPPA will be reduced gradually. Monitoring is maintained at a lower level through periodic evaluations.

4.7.3 Institutional continuation

An independent local ombudsman apparatus is established to ensure the rights of all groups. The OSCE or UNDP can assist during a transition period to ensure capacity building and the rule of law.

4.7.4 Economic stabilisation

A transition fund managed by the BIS is being activated for the long-term reconstruction and social development of both Ukraine and the Donbass. Funding is distributed according to achieved development indicators and local administrative capacity.

4.7.5 Final phase

The consolidation phase ends when independent indicators show stable operations over a period of at least three years. International support is then transferred to ordinary cooperation frameworks, such as EU programmes or development banks, depending on the final status. When local political, economic and institutional stability has been achieved, the transitional arrangement ceases, and the region's further development is governed by democratic and sovereign processes in accordance with the will of the people.

5 Transformative potential and long-term stability

5.1 Local level – social and political stabilisation

The RCR model facilitates a society that is no longer defined by conflict, but by institutionally guaranteed participation. When local will has been clarified and implemented, political participation, economic activity and social reconstruction can take place within predictable frameworks. This reduces the risk of permanent marginalisation and creates a basis for legitimacy and responsible governance.

5.2 Regional level – Ukraine as a stable link

The arrangement provides an opportunity for Ukraine to establish a neutral position as an economic and political link between major blocs. A stable Donbass will reduce pressure on national integration and open up a political climate in which infrastructure,

trade and energy cooperation can be developed without permanent bloc tensions. This provides incentives for both the EU and Russia to support stability over competition.

5.3 Global level – be at the forefront of block-locking

At a time when several emerging power centers, such as the BRICS, China, India and others, existing structures are being challenged. The RCRmodel has a parallel function of laying the foundation for a conflict resolution paradigm in which one bloc is not forced to submit to another. The solution is based on verifiable local sovereignty, international balance and functional participation from multiple spheres without dominance. The model shows that multipolarity does not necessarily have to lead to new bloc formation or cold war.

5.4 Transfer value and institutional learning

By combining conditional recognition, internationally guaranteed popular vote and mechanical verification of process, the model establishes a framework that can be further developed for use in other frozen territorial conflicts. Institutions such as the UN, DPPA, OSCE, and BIS may eventually develop standardized procedures for zero-trust-based status clarifications.

6 Final reflections

The RCR model does not seek to create idealized solutions based on moral ethical and ideological considerations, but to find working solutions as the world de facto looks today. It builds stability through predictability, accountability and measurable progress. Through work on this agreement, Ukraine, Russia, the United States and the EU have the opportunity to raise the importance of conflict resolution to a higher level. A level where one relates to the fact that some conflicts arise as a result of great power rivalry, and not necessarily imperialist expansion.

Similar situations will inevitably arise in several places in the world as the tectonic geopolitical shifts we face progress. Taiwan and Venezuela are ongoing examples of similar 'hotspots', where geostrategic interests turn into hot conflict. In a highly technologized and abstracted world, it is necessary to form tools that look beyond the obvious conflict zone and seek to solve the root problems at their deepest level, in order to teach us how to form stable political communities within an emerging multipolar world order.

6.1 The way forward

The RCR framework seeks to establish a structure for navigating out of a stalemate by linking regional popular will to an internationally guaranteed system of security,

legitimacy and economic stability, in a way that all warring parties emerge better from the situation. The document is considered a starting point for negotiations towards a feasible plan.