

Escalation of clashes in the Donbas

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Since 11 January there have been regular battles in the Donbas between the forces of pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian army troops. These are the most serious clashes since the truce in September 2014. They have been centred around the airport in Donetsk, where the Ukrainian forces' positions in the area of the new terminal have been the main target of separatist attacks for the last few days. In response, on 17-18 January, the Ukrainian side has conducted an effective counterattack with heavy weaponry including tanks, and temporarily returned the *status quo* at the beginning of this year. However, on 22 January the Ukrainian troops were forced to leave the completely destroyed new terminal at Donetsk airport. This means the total loss of control of the airport, which has become a symbol of the containment of the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine. Regular artillery bombardment has also taken place in other parts of the Donbas, including the vicinity of the Debaltsevo road junction, Volnovakha and Mariupol.

The intensification of the fighting in the Donbas stems directly from the lack of agreement between the parties to hold a peace summit in Astana among the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France. By significantly increasing its own activity and provoking a heightened military response from Ukraine, Moscow is threatening the resumption of war, in order to force unconditional consent – from Chancellor Angela Merkel in particular – to hold a new round of political talks. The aim would be to force Kyiv to agree to a new settlement amending the Minsk agreement (the key provisions of which Russia has not met), which would give a wide degree of autonomy to the areas of the Donbas controlled by the separatists.

A renewed outbreak of fighting

Since 11 January, pro-Russian separatists stepped up their shelling of government forces' positions at the airport in Donetsk, which had remained under the partial control of both parties; on 13 January the control tower was destroyed. On the same day, as a result of the shelling of a Ukrainian post near Volnovakha, a civilian bus was also destroyed, resulting in the death of 13 people. In the face of the increasingly difficult situation for the Ukrainian forces defending their positions at the airport, on 17 January the Ukrainian army launched their first offensive action since August. They succeeded in pushing through a corridor to the part of the airport defended by the Ukrainian units, and began the evacuation of the wounded who had been there for several days. Subsequently, the Ukrainian force extended the area under their control with the deployment of a tank company. The Ukrainian counterattack should be regarded as having been forced upon them, as it was intended to

prevent the Ukrainian army elite subdivisions (referred to as the 'cyborgs') who were defending themselves at the airport from being slowly eliminated. As a result of heavy attacks by the separatists, which almost totally destroyed the new terminal controlled by the Ukrainian troops and caused casualties among them, in the morning of 22 January the 'cyborgs' were forced to withdraw from their positions in Donetsk airport. In addition to the airport in Donetsk and the surrounding area, there were exchanges of fire in other areas. As has become usual, the clashes were mainly focused around the road junction at Debaltsevo, Mariupol in the Donetsk region and Stanitsa Luganskaya and Schastye in the Lugansk region. The declared aim of the Ukrainian forces was not to try and expand the territory they hold in the Donbas, but to maintain their positions. Kyiv says that the Ukrainian units have not crossed the demarcation lines which the parties set out in the Minsk agreements. The ferocity of the fighting in the vicinity of the airport is demonstrated by the numbers of wounded reported by hospitals, to which at least 200 Ukrainian soldiers (also from other battle zones) have arrived in recent days. The number of deaths on both sides is much lower (between 3 to 8 killed per day, reports from both parties about their opponents' losses are unreliable), although they are approaching the levels reached this spring and the moments of extreme tension which have occurred during the ceasefire period. Kyiv has begun the first mobilisation of this year, which it plans to include 50,000 reservists; it has also confirmed that it is firing upon separatist position in other parts of the Donbas. Individual firefights, which in recent days have become more or less permanent, are taking place primarily around Mariupol and in the villages northwest of Lugansk (Schastye, Slovianoserbsk) and Gorlovka, Debaltsevo and Stanitsa Luganskaja.

The collapse of preparations for the Astana summit

The upsurge in activity by the separatist armed forces, under Russian command, took place after it became clear that the peace negotiations scheduled for 15 January in Astana in the framework of the so-called 'Normandy format' (the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France) would not happen. In a telephone conversation with Putin on 10 January, Chancellor Merkel stated that she would not participate in the meeting without first achieving "concrete progress" in getting the separatists to implement the Minsk agreements, and called on Moscow to exert influence on them. This position was reiterated on 16 January during a telephone call between Poroshenko and Merkel, who agreed (according to a press release from President Poroshenko's administration) that the "essential conditions" for resuming political dialogue were the withdrawal of heavy weapons and the release of prisoners.

On the other hand, after the outbreak of fighting, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry said in a statement on 18 January that it favoured the full implementation of the Minsk agreements, which would create the conditions to resume peace talks at the contact group level (with representative of Ukraine, Russia, the OSCE and the separatists) and at the summit of the leaders in Astana. Kyiv proposed a ceasefire as of 19 January, but this has not been accepted. Meanwhile, the Russian Foreign Ministry has blamed the Ukrainian forces for the renewed fighting and sabotaging the contact group meeting in Minsk. At the same time, Moscow has called for a full ceasefire, the rapid organisation of a meeting of the contact group, and for Kyiv to start constitutional reform with the equal participation of all regions.

The escalation of the fighting as a Russian instrument

It seems that the intensification of clashes around the airport in the Donbas since 10 January is a consequence of the failure of the preparations for the summit in Astana. In this situation, the Kremlin has probably come to the conclusion that only the threat of a serious escalation of armed conflict, for which Kyiv should be blamed, can break the political impasse and persuade the EU (especially Germany), to come to terms with Russia's failure to implement the Minsk agreements. Despite its official rhetoric, Moscow is uninterested in fully implementing its core provisions, including the withdrawal of heavy weapons by the separatists, and creating a security zone on both sides of the Ukrainian-Russian border and arranging international monitoring for it.

Russia's aim, as it supports the separatists, is to force the EU (and especially Germany) to consent to participate in the peace summit in Astana without any preconditions (such as implementing the Minsk agreements) and to force Kyiv (with the support of Western countries) to start the process of political settlement. This would include plans involving the constitutional system of Ukraine which would be disadvantageous for Kyiv, including granting autonomy to the part of the Donbas controlled by the separatists. The gradual freezing of the conflict in the Donbas which has been observed since September – as Kyiv cuts off financial transfers to the region and the humanitarian crisis there deepens – is not in the interests of Moscow, as this limits the Donbas's scope as an instrument for putting pressure on Kyiv.

On 21 January a meeting in Berlin was held among the foreign ministers of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France, which was intended to be a step towards organising a meeting of the contact group. In a joint statement, the ministers called on all sides involved to create the relevant conditions for an effective cease-fire, for the delivery of humanitarian aid and for detainees to be released (the withdrawal of heavy weapons was not mentioned as a precondition for the peace summit). If there is still no agreement on holding a summit at the head of government level, the separatists are likely to further escalate the hostilities.

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