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The Donbas conflict after the Mariupol shelling

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Armed activity in the Donbas has resumed along the entire length of the front line in recent days. This has been triggered by separatists (supported by Russian units) who are attacking civilian targets with growing intensity. On 24 January, 31 people were killed and more than 100 injured in Mariupol due to rocket fire launched by separatist forces. However, the main focus of the clashes was the villages controlled by Kyiv, located to the north of Lugansk, west of Donetsk and around Debaltsevo.

By stepping up the military operations in the Donbas, Russia wants to raise the pressure on Ukraine, in order to get Kyiv to initiate discussions with the authorities of the self-proclaimed republics, and force the West to come to terms with Russia's failure to implement the Minsk agreements and accept Russian conditions for resolving the conflict. The actions taken by the Ukrainian authorities indicate that they expect a further escalation of hostilities in the Donbas, as well as a boost in terrorist acts (which have already been noted in recent weeks) in other regions of Ukraine.

The attack on Mariupol has rekindled the debate about EU sanctions on Russia. In Germany, which has assumed the role of coordinating EU policy towards the conflict in Ukraine, there have been demands to take stricter measures against Moscow. At the same time, the lack of progress in implementing the Minsk agreements demonstrates that current German policy is wearing thin, based as it is on sanctions on one hand, and on continuously offering Russia deals to build a common economic space and security on the other. Berlin has no idea what an alternative policy could look like, which is giving rise to growing frustration among German politicians.

The situation at the front

Since 23 January, the separatist forces have intensified their actions along the main sections of the front line: to the north of Lugansk (Stanitsa Luganskaya, Shchastie, Krymskoye and Novotoshkovka), west of Donetsk, and around the road junction at Debaltsevo, and the towns of Avdeyevka and Mariupol. In the first-named area battles are being fought constantly; during the day the separatists renew their attacks, and both sides' positions are being fired on round the clock. Past attempts to flank the Ukrainian positions have been unsuccessful. In some areas (Debaltsevo, Shchastie) separatist subunits have periodically launched assaults on the Ukrainian positions. So far, however, the separatists have not achieved any major successes (the Ukrainian side has only confirmed the loss of the village of Krasnyi Partizan). The government forces are limiting themselves to responding to local offensives.

The separatists' activities are increasingly being directed against civilians. In the morning of 24 January, a residential area on the eastern outskirts of Mariupol (500,000 inhabitants) came under fire from BM-21 Grad missile launchers (according to Ukrainian estimates, a total of 120 rockets were fired at the city). The same day, the self-proclaimed leader of the People's Republic of Donetsk, Aleksandr Zakharchenko, announced that the separatist forces had initiated an operation to "recover Mariupol", but this was not followed up by any substantial action, and was most likely a move calculated to intimidate the civilian population.

Since 25 January, both sides have concentrated their forces in the vicinity of Debaltsevo, where Ukrainian positions have driven a wedge into the separatist-controlled areas. Intensified shelling of the Ukrainian positions is ongoing. So far, the separatists have not made any decisive move to encircle the area, and have limited themselves to launching attacks from the east. The vicinity of Sanzharovka has seen the heaviest fighting so far (assaults on the Ukrainian positions have been launched on several occasions). The separatists' strikes towards Popasnaya, which has consistently been one of their main targets, can be seen as an attempt to close the circle from the east.

The separatists are receiving continuous reinforcements from Russia (both personnel and material). According to Ukrainian figures, the number of Russian soldiers on the territory of Ukraine increased over the week from 8500 to 12,000 soldiers. The weapons supplied to the Donbas include the heaviest 300 mm-calibre BM-30 Smerch multiple-rocket launchers (for comparison, the Grad shoots 122 mm-calibre rockets); at the moment, however, this report cannot be verified.

Kyiv's response

Immediately after the Mariupol shelling, the Ukrainian government decided to strengthen the city's defences. At an extraordinary meeting of the National Security and Defence Council (NSDC) on 25 January, President Petro Poroshenko said that Kyiv has irrefutable evidence of the involvement of Russian forces in the crimes in the Donbas. The NSDC also ordered the preparation of responses to the growing threat from Russia, and in the event of possible activities by terrorist groups in other regions of Ukraine. On 26 January, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk announced the introduction of a 'state of exception' in the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts, which is intended to increase the efficiency of the emergency services and civil defence; he also set up a National Committee for Exceptional Situations (headed by the Prime Minister). The state of exception is provided for in the 2013 Civil Defence Code, and does not restrict the rights of citizens as would a state of emergency or martial law. Even the latter type of decision, however, will not have any material impact on the region. Another symbolic action Kyiv has taken is parliament's adoption on 27 January of a law recognising Russia as an aggressor-state, although this will have no practical consequences.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian Interior Ministry forces are becoming increasingly involved in countering terrorist threats in most regions, in particular the Kharkov and Odessa oblasts. Moreover, the authorities in the Dnepropetrovsk, Kharkov and Zaporozhe oblasts have decided to introduce additional security measures in view of the increasing threat of terrorism. ?These regions have implemented additional security measures at places of mass public assembly (including railway stations, markets, supermarkets) and strategic

facilities (power, gas and water plants, bridges).

Russia's reactions

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that blaming Russia and the separatists for the tragedy in Mariupol was "groundless", and the Russian representative to the OSCE questioned the credibility of the OSCE Observer Mission's report of 24 January. In telephone conversations on 25 January with the heads of American and European diplomacy, John Kerry and Federica Mogherini, Lavrov blamed Ukraine for escalating hostilities in the Donbas, accusing it of violating the Minsk agreements and ignoring President Putin's proposal of 15 January to withdraw heavy artillery. He also effectively rejected Kerry's demand to include the US in multilateral talks on resolving the conflict, and urged Western countries to put pressure on Kyiv. Lavrov also stressed the need for Kyiv to hold direct negotiations with representatives of the separatists, and again called on the Ukrainian authorities to initiate a "constitutional process", i.e. negotiations with separatist over the confederalisation and neutralisation of the Ukrainian state. Moscow's hardening stance is also demonstrated by Putin's statement of 26 January, in which he again described the conflict in Ukraine as a civil war, and called the volunteer formations fighting against separatists "NATO's foreign legion", which "is not pursuing the national interests of the Ukrainian people", but was rather carrying out the task of "the geopolitical containment of Russia".

While taking part in the commemorations of the International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Holocaust at the Jewish Museum in Moscow on 27 January, Putin also referred to the situation in south-eastern Ukraine. He stated that claims to global domination leads humanity to cross terrible borders; that attempts to pressure sovereign states by the use of force will result in tragedies; and that indifference and double standards are destructive, as evidenced by the current tragedy in south-eastern Ukraine, where for months civilians have been being killed in cold blood.

The EU's reactions

In a joint statement on 26 January, the heads of many EU states and governments condemned the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, and noted Russia's continued and growing support for the separatists. They also called on Moscow to condemn the actions of the separatist forces, and to implement the Minsk agreements. They highlighted the possibility of taking a harsher line towards Russia, and called on EU foreign ministers to consider further sanctions at a meeting on 29 January.

Also, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier condemned the attack on Mariupol, calling once again on the parties to maintain dialogue. In a telephone conversation with President Putin on 25 January, Merkel again called on Russia to influence the separatists in order to avoid escalation of the conflict. At the same time, some Christian Democrat and opposition Green politicians called for stricter sanctions against Russia. The CDU's partners in the ruling coalition, the Social Democrats, made any decision to tighten EU sanctions conditional on the report from the OSCE observers currently in Ukraine.

The attack on Mariupol, as with the earlier shelling of civilian targets in Donetsk, took place a few hours after the meeting of the foreign ministers of Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia (the so-called 'Normandy format') in Berlin. Despite the lack of progress in implementing the Minsk agreements – which for Germany is the basis for peace talks, and on which Merkel has made the lifting of sanctions against Russia conditional – Germany has in recent weeks repeatedly made proposals for cooperation to Russia. These cover both the creation of a free trade area between the EU and the Eurasian Union (Merkel proposed this in Davos on 22 January), and the revitalisation of the idea of the Partnership for Modernisation as a platform for future cooperation with Russia.

The lack of progress in Germany's policy towards Russia is weakening the position of the country's foreign minister as an effective mediator in the conflict (on 23 January Steinmeier once again called upon Russia to take advantage of "perhaps the last chance for a peaceful end to the conflict"). This also calls into question the current German strategy of promoting dialogue, diplomacy, and making Russia a series of offers, and imposing sanctions as a last resort. At the same time, there is no sign of any new policy strategy from the EU, including Germany, towards Russia.

Prospects for the conflict in the Donbas

Although the separatists are making efforts to shorten the front lines by eliminating the Ukrainian positions penetrating the areas under their control (e.g. around Debaltsevo), it must be assumed that their main purpose is not to occupy more areas of the Donbas. Instead, by intensifying military operations and firing on civilian targets, they are hoping to intimidate the residents and discourage them from supporting the government forces.

Statements by Russian politicians suggest that Moscow has decided to step up its military and political pressure on Ukraine in order to force Kyiv to initiate discussions with the authorities of the self-proclaimed republics on their future relations with Kyiv, and to recognise the territorial gains which the rebels have made since the signing of the cease-fire in September. By intensifying military operations in the Donbas, Moscow also wants to force the West to come to terms with Russia's failure to implement the Minsk agreements (in part concerning the withdrawal of military units and monitoring the Ukrainian-Russian border), and to demonstrate that the only way to bring an end to the fighting is to put pressure on Kyiv to give up its armed resistance to the Russian aggression and agree to Russian conditions (including Ukraine's neutral geopolitical status and its confederalisation). Russia's present behaviour and rhetoric appear to show that the Kremlin does not believe that the EU is ready to tighten sanctions any further, and that any new sanctions by the US will be merely symbolic.