

Consequences of the incident in the Sea of Azov

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Before midnight on 25 November, President Petro Poroshenko issued a decree at the request of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine to introduce martial law for a period of 60 days, while announcing that a general mobilisation will not be declared and civil liberties will not be restricted (the full text of the decree regulating the scope of martial law has not been released). According to the constitution, the document should be approved within two days by Ukraine's parliament by an absolute majority of votes (the parliamentary session will begin today at 4pm local time).

Kyiv's decision is a response to an incident which occurred in the morning of 25 November in the Azov Sea when three ships of the Ukrainian Navy, travelling from the port of Odessa to Mariupol, attempted to cross the Kerch Strait. After a Russian patrol rammed a Ukrainian tugboat, the waterway under the bridge in the strait was blocked with a tanker. After the Ukrainian ships had spent several hours trying to get out of the Russian blockade, in the evening they were fired upon, and then detained after being boarded. According to the Ukrainian side, 23 sailors have been detained, of whom 6 have been injured. Russia accused the Ukrainian sailors of violating the maritime borders of the Russian Federation and carrying out "dangerous manoeuvres".

Commentary: the political aspects

- **The attack on and detention of the Ukrainian ships should not be seen as a prelude to large-scale Russian military aggression: the political costs of opening a new phase of the armed conflict would be high (possible further sanctions by the West; the consolidation of the international community; anti-Russian public mobilisation in Ukraine), and the potential benefits would be dubious.** The incident most likely represents a desire by Russia to show that it is ready to take decisive action in the Azov Sea basin, which Moscow sees as domestic Russian waters, and is intended to expose the helplessness of the Ukrainian side.
- **Given the scale of the incident in the Azov Sea, and the four years and more of war in the Donbas, Poroshenko's decision to impose martial law is a surprising action, one which is inadequate in relation to the current threat. Therefore, we should assume that the decision to introduce martial law is an attempt to exploit the situation and increase his public support, and it should thus be seen in the context of the electoral campaign (which is effectively already under way) for the presidential elections on 31 March 2019.**

It is in President Poroshenko's interest to skilfully manage the current conflict in the Azov Sea in such a way as to gain public sympathy. A loss of face and a lack of decisive action could cause a further decline in his popularity and simultaneously strengthen his current main rival, Yulia Tymoshenko.

- **In the absence of decisive action by Kyiv, this incident could harm President Poroshenko by causing him to lose face and risking a further loss of his credibility in the eyes of the public.** The Ukrainian decision to introduce martial law was therefore taken in order to avoid accusations of passivity and that the Ukrainian state had failed to make the appropriate preparations to repel armed aggression from Russia. Allegations of incompetence in defending the country could adversely affect the course of the incumbent president's election campaign, who has presented himself as a guarantor of Ukraine's security.
- The Ukrainian parliament is likely to approve Poroshenko's decree to introduce martial law, which may have a direct impact on the conduct of the presidential elections. According to the provisions of the law on the legal regime of martial law, during such a period it is not possible to hold elections at all levels. Officially, the election campaign should begin 90 days before voting day, which would still fall under the period of martial law. **The administrative and legal regulations in force at the time may be used to limit electioneering by rivals to the incumbent president.** Under the provisions of the law, the authorities will be able to decide on the prohibition of political parties and social organisations which are deemed to threaten the sovereignty and security of the country. In addition, the government may reserve the right to take full control over the dissemination of the mass media, including television stations and websites. These powers may be important for President Poroshenko, who is currently running in third place in the opinion polls with around 10% support.
- In response to the events in the Azov Sea, Moscow has submitted a request for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council on this issue (to be held on 26 November). The Kremlin's reaction to the events, however, has so far been relatively restrained; only a few individual Russian officials have given any public reactions. **The Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova summoned the representative of Ukraine to the Foreign Ministry, and called the event "a provocation made by bandits' methods" by the Ukrainian authorities.** The president's spokesman Dmitri Peskov called the event "a very dangerous Ukrainian provocation" that requires explanation, and has said that the Russian Foreign Ministry will prepare a special statement on the matter.
- The events in the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait represent another stage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict resulting from the annexation of Crimea. **Russia's decision to escalate the conflict in the Azov Sea and take very firm action against Ukrainian forces is intended to demonstrate the finality of the annexation of Crimea and Russia's full control over the Kerch Strait.** In this way, Moscow wants to force Ukraine to recognise the *de facto* shift of the maritime border in connection with the annexation of Crimea, while at the same time demonstrating its own strength, as well as the futility of any Ukrainian military action in the Azov Sea basin.

- **Most likely, however, Russia will try to exploit the situation by accusing Ukraine on the international stage of taking offensive action, as well as by escalating the political conflict with Kyiv, in order to polarise sentiments within Ukraine and bring about a possible increase in support for pro-Russian groups before the elections scheduled for 2019.** We should not expect Russia to undertake a large-scale military offensive against Ukraine in the near future, as this would consolidate Ukrainian society in the face of the threat. Moscow hopes that the winner of next year's elections in Ukraine will conduct a policy more favourable to the Kremlin; moreover, it will probably try to use the events in the Sea of Azov in its domestic propaganda to improve its falling poll ratings.

The incident's military context

- The incident occurred while a group of ships were transferring from Odessa to Mariupol to strengthen the Ukrainian grouping in the Azov Sea. The group, composed of two armoured artillery boats, the R-175 *Berdyansk* and the R-179 *Nikopol* (which have been in service since 2016 and 2018 respectively) and the tugboat *Yana Kapu* (in service since 1974), were supposed to join the ships which have been based in Mariupol since September (including twin gunboats, the R177 *Kremenchug* and the R178 *Lubny*). **The deployment of new ships in the Azov Sea would at the moment give Ukraine a significant advantage in these waters over Russian forces**, which presently consist essentially of the unarmed patrol boats of the Coast Guard of the Border Service of the FSB.
- The Ukrainian artillery boats need not have been sent to Mariupol by sea. In September the first two ships initially reached Berdyansk via land, and were only then sent to Mariupol on the Azov Sea. At that time, Russia decided not to take any hostile action, apart from merely escorting the Ukrainian ships. This was a reaction to Russia's blockade, ongoing since the end of April, of Ukrainian commercial vessels leaving and entering the Ukrainian ports on the Azov Sea.
- According to some media reports, some ships left Mariupol to rescue the detained Ukrainian ships, but they abandoned the attempt and made for Berdyansk. The potential loss of all these ships – both those detained by the Russians and the others remaining in Mariupol – would have been extremely serious for the Ukrainian Navy, which has been significantly shrunk since the loss of Crimea and the majority of the ships based there. Currently, the Azov Sea has four of the six newest 58155 Giurza-M artillery boats in the Ukrainian fleet (the other two are those which have been detained by the Russians), two of the six tugs (one having been detained by the Russians) and the sole command ship.
- In the morning of 26 November, the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine issued an order **summoning Ukrainian army units to a state of full combat readiness**. However, from the present reports it is unclear whether there have been any troop movements in connection with this order. The situation on the line of demarcation in the Donbas is also relatively stable.
- The Kerch Strait incident suggests that **Russia had already been prepared to take such a step if the Ukrainian Navy had further expanded its presence in the Azov Sea**. Whereas

a single collision between two ships might plausibly have been seen as a coincidence, the situation thereafter – bringing out a ship to blockade the waterway, the blockade of Ukrainian ships, and then their boarding, which was clearly carried out by special units (the Coast Guard of the Border Service of the FSB, although its soldiers do not usually participate in standard patrols), and the involvement of air forces in the area of the incident (Ka-52 attack helicopters and Su-25 attack aircraft) – suggest that **the Russian action was deliberate and calculated to provoke an armed reaction from Ukraine.**