

The Donbas crisis: between bluff and war

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During the last days of March, representatives of Ukraine's government (including President Zelensky) and army announced that Russia was preparing a wide-ranging armed provocation against Ukraine. According to the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Gen. Ruslan Khomchak, the Russian army has assembled 28 tactical battalion groups in the border regions and occupied territories (these are subunits prepared to conduct military operations; each group numbers about 800 soldiers), and in the near future this number should rise by another 25 groups. According to the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (military intelligence), Russia is preparing to deploy regular troops in the occupied part of Donbas (currently around 28,000 soldiers are serving in the formations of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Militias), and increasing its presence in Crimea (where 32,700 soldiers and sailors of the Russian Armed Forces are currently based). Ukrainian military intelligence does not exclude the possibility - under the pretext of protecting the citizens of the Russian Federation - that Russian troops could cross onto the territory of Ukraine, including areas outside those already occupied.

The reports about the increase in the presence of Russian troops appeared as the number of armed incidents and casualties is rising (18 people on both sides were killed in March), causing great anxiety in the West. Kyiv has undertaken active communication with its foreign partners, including the first direct telephone conversation between presidents Volodymyr Zelensky and Joe Biden, during which the American leader assured US support in counteracting Russian aggression. In turn, Germany and France expressed their support in a joint statement for Ukrainian independence and territorial integrity within the borders recognised by international law. Similar declarations were made by the NATO Secretary General and the British Prime Minister.

Kyiv's statements and the intensified Ukrainian information campaign highlighting the Russian Armed Forces' increased activity met with a decisive, critical response from Moscow. Russian politicians accused the Ukrainian government of pursuing a policy aimed at provoking an armed conflict in the interests of the US, and of breaking off the talks within the tripartite contact group for a peaceful solution to the situation in the Donbas. On 1 April, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Kyiv was responsible for aggravating the situation in eastern Ukraine, and accused President Zelensky of trying to improve his opinion poll numbers. In addition, on 6 April Lavrov called on Berlin and Paris to put immediate pressure on Kiev in connection with the exacerbation of the Donbas situation. He also emphasised that Russia was disappointed with the West's reaction to Ukraine's increasing military presence along the demarcation line. On the same day, Kremlin

spokesman Dmitri Peskov criticised Kyiv for its efforts to strengthen cooperation with NATO, pointing out that this could lead to a domestic crisis breaking out in Ukraine. For his part Russia's deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov, while reporting on his contacts with the administration in Washington, stated that Moscow had warned the US against continuing to support Kyiv's anti-Russian moves.

Commentary

- The activities of the Russian Armed Forces in the regions bordering Ukraine and in occupied Crimea have not so far exceeded those observed in recent years during the final phase of the winter training period (which usually lasts until the end of May). At the same time, Russia's decision to carry out the operation – which the Ukrainian side is warning about, and which from the military point of view Moscow can initiate without having to make additional preparations or draw forces from other regions of the Russian Federation – remains an open question. This option cannot be ruled out, as the Russian Armed Forces' potential on the border with Ukraine means that they are capable of undertaking limited involvement at any time, depending on the Kremlin's political decision.
- It is possible that the warnings issued by Ukraine's government and military are not simply reports about the Russian army's actual intentions/preparations, but may also be an element of Kyiv's policy of mobilising its Western partners to offer greater support and break the stalemate in the negotiations on resolving the Donbas conflict. The crisis in Russia's relations with the West over the attempt to assassinate Aleksei Navalny also seems to be significant for Kyiv. It has encouraged the Ukrainian authorities to take more radical steps against Moscow, such as imposing sanctions on pro-Russian politicians such as Viktor Medvedchuk and his media assets. In the context of Kyiv's information war, one should note Ukraine's announcement that it initiated a general military call-up in the occupied Donbas on 1 April (this is standard procedure for most of the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine), as well as the earlier report that reservists are being mobilised on the occupied territories (which is part of the mobilisation exercises being carried out by the Russian army).
- A significant increase in the degree of aggression can be observed in Russian-Ukrainian relations since at least the start of this year, whose main element is the possibility that full-on armed confrontation may resume in the territories Russia is occupying. This has resulted from the escalation of the military situation in the Donbas which has been observed since the end of last year thanks to the *de facto* breach of the ceasefire as of 27 July. Another reason is the failure of all attempts to break the negotiating stalemate on resolving the Donbas conflict. The last initiative of this type – which was proposed at the start of 2021 by Germany and France, and concerned the implementation of points of agreements under the so-called clusters – ended in failure due to Russia's disagreement with the procedure for agreeing a new plan, as well as the Kremlin's disclosure of the negotiations' details to the media.
- In this situation, the authorities in Kyiv have decided to bolster their position as they strive to change the peace talks' current format. To this end, Ukraine has been expressing hopes for several months that the West might increase its involvement in the negotiation

process, and for the direct participation of the United States in it. This was to be served by President Zelensky's appeal at the end of March for support for Ukraine from its European partners in counteracting Russian aggression, together with the resolution of the Ukrainian parliament calling on the international community to increase pressure on the Russian Federation. The support for Kyiv from Western politicians, especially President Biden (with whom Zelenskiy has been trying to talk since January) represents an immediate success for the Ukrainian president and will be promoted as such domestically.

- Moscow's attitude is largely part of the ongoing psychological war it is waging against Ukraine and the West. Ostentatious troop movements or constant fire along the demarcation line may provoke Ukrainian troops to open fire, which would allow the Kremlin to accuse Ukraine of committing an act of aggression. Another important element in maintaining the tense atmosphere is the activity of the Russian media, which often resorts to the use of disinformation. The consistent disavowal of Kyiv's policy and the emphasis on President Zelensky's 'adventurism' is intended to persuade the West to talk with Russia about checking the Ukrainian authorities and limiting their 'anti-Russian' activities. To this end, Moscow wants to create the impression that Kyiv is responsible for an 'unintentional' escalation of the Donbas conflict, which is supposed to be an additional argument in the debate on Ukraine. One signal that the Kremlin was counting on such a development of events was the conversation between the German chancellor and the French president with the Russian leader on 31 March, during which the latter stressed his concern about Kyiv's escalation of the situation in the Donbas. Thus, in view of the ongoing cooling of Russia's relations with the West, Moscow is interested in exploiting the growing tension around Ukraine to force the US and key EU countries to dialogue with Russia, and ideally to offer Moscow concessions in exchange for calming the situation.