

Ukraine prepares for limited conflict with Russia

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On 7 December, Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR) announced that Russia is strengthening its support for the armed forces of the so-called separatists. In the 1st and 2nd Army Corps (based in Donetsk and Luhansk respectively), training of soldiers under the supervision of Russian officers and the mobilisation of military reserves are underway. The appearance of new tanks, self-propelled artillery and infantry fighting vehicles, as well as the activity of sniper groups whose task is to provoke Ukrainian forces, have been reported near the border line in the Donbas. In an earlier announcement on 30 November, HUR announced the discovery of significant shipments of ammunition and fuel from Russia destined for the separatist forces. On the other hand, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission has reported that its work in the self-proclaimed republics is being increasingly frequently obstructed, with its free movement and observation being blocked.

Tensions rose further after Russian troops began exercises in the Southern Military District on 1 December, in which over 6000 soldiers and 500 tanks are participating. The Armed Forces of Ukraine have not yet begun any measures for general mobilisation; so far, their activity has been limited to the construction of new engineering fortifications in the east and south (including barbed wire dams and concrete blocks on the beach in Mariupol), and checking air-raid shelters in Kyiv. However, these local actions signal the country's overall readiness to resist potential aggression.

Kyiv considers unlikely those scenarios which assume a Russian armed attack on the majority of the country's territory. Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky and defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov have stated that Ukraine has consistently been reckoning with the possibility that the armed conflict in the east of the country may resume, and that the country is ready to repel aggression.

Commentary

- Both the statements by the government in Kyiv and its reactions to Russia's activity have so far been relatively restrained. They see such playing up of the military threat as a permanent element of Kremlin policy, whose aim is to provoke Ukrainian troops to start military operations. Kyiv – also under the influence of the West – has been trying not to take any steps that could constitute a pretext for the incursion of Russian forces. The scenario most likely to bring about an escalation is the possible resumption of the conflict in the Donbas, or possibly in the vicinity of Crimea. These fears have been justified *inter alia* by the Russian armed forces creating further tactical battalion groups in these areas, which could be used in a limited armed conflict.

- In the international dimension, Kyiv has been using Russia's actions to obtain stronger political support from the West. The Ukrainian authorities, aware that the NATO states are unlikely to provide military aid, are focusing on efforts to get supplies of new, more advanced weapons which could significantly hamper any Russian aggression. This mainly concerns modern anti-aircraft batteries and combat planes, arming navy units with anti-ship missiles, and acquiring US equipment which has been withdrawn from Afghanistan.
- Mobilisation in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR) has been accompanied by a propaganda offensive from Russia and the so-called separatists, in which Kyiv is accused of escalating tensions in the region and attempting to resolve the conflict by force. In recent days, the leader of the so-called DPR, Denis Pushilin, visited Moscow, where he suggested that the Russian Federation could provide military aid. These actions are an attempt to force Kyiv to implement the Minsk agreements, which provide for the return of both the self-proclaimed republics (which are *de facto* controlled by Russia) to the Ukrainian state with special rights, which would allow Moscow to use them as instruments to influence Kyiv's policy.