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Consequences of the Deterioration of the Situation in Donbas

Anna Maria Dyner, Daniel Szeligowski*

The recent exacerbation of hostilities in Ukraine's Donbas is a reaction by Russia-backed irregular forces to actions taken by the Ukraine Armed Forces (UAF), who since December 2016 have been gradually restoring control over territory along the Minsk-agreed separation line. Russia accuses Ukraine of breaching the Minsk agreement and blames the Ukrainian authorities for the outbreak of fighting. The argument will be used by Russia to lift sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the EU. However, the Ukrainian authorities claim that the UAF's actions have not violated the Minsk agreement since it provides for the territory in question to be under Ukraine's control.

Deterioration of the Situation in Donbas. On 29 January, Russia-backed irregulars launched a massive attack on Ukrainian positions around Avdiivka, 10 km north of Donetsk. The offensive was repelled, but more than a dozen Ukrainian soldiers were killed and several dozen more were wounded. Shelling of the city also resulted in civilian casualties. The situation stabilised on February 4 and 5, which allowed some basic infrastructure such as electricity, water and heating to be restored. However, the two sides continue to exchange fire.

The attack was a response to the latest actions of the Ukrainian troops along the separation line. In manoeuvres known as a creeping offensive, the Ukrainian army has been moving gradually forward since the middle of December 2016, regaining control over the territories in the buffer zone previously under the control of neither sides. At the end of December 2016, this led to an increase in the intensity of fighting around Svitlodarsk (on the border of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts), when the UAF regained control of Novoluhanske. Then, at the end of January 2017, Ukrainian troops took up new positions around the industrial zone in Avdiivka. This was the direct cause of recent escalation. The south-east of the combat zone is near a highway connecting Donetsk and Horlivka (two strategically important cities controlled by the irregulars). Moreover, a water filtering station is located in the eastern part of Avdiivka. This station, among others, supplies northern parts of Donetsk and several villages beyond Kyiv's purview (the Ukrainian forces were reportedly issued with an ultimatum demanding their withdrawal from the vicinity of the station). Therefore, there remains a significant risk that another offensive on Ukrainian positions in this region will be launched by Russia-backed irregulars.

Russia's Motives. The Russian authorities use the conflict in Donbas to maintain Moscow's influence over Ukraine. By discrediting Ukraine's actions in the region, Russia will try to secure itself the role of ceasefire guarantor, peace talks mediator, and defender of the Donbas population, which could eventually allow it to be perceived in a light other than as the country that triggered the war. Russia's long-term goal remains the lifting of U.S. and EU sanctions.

At the same time, seeking a potential agreement with the new U.S. administration, Russia will try to freeze the situation in Donbas. However, another escalation cannot be excluded since the irregulars, pursuing their own goals, will demand additional Russian support in conducting military operations.

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Still, Russia will claim that it respects the Minsk agreements and accuse Ukraine of breaking them, emphasising the role of President Petro Poroshenko. One Russian aim is that Ukraine will be perceived as a country that does not fulfil its international obligations, and whose policy resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe in Donbas.

Russia will also aim to launch the next round of talks over the future of Ukraine. It has already demanded that Germany and France increase pressure on the government in Kyiv in order to make it implement the Minsk agreements. The situation in Ukraine is also likely to be a discussion point between Moscow and the new U.S. administration.

International Reaction. The response of France and Germany, participants of Normandy format, was limited. The French reaction was just a statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, delivered by a spokesman, which condemned the escalation of the hostilities in eastern Ukraine. The French strongly emphasised the need to respect and implement the principles of Minsk II, and called for an immediate ceasefire. Germany's interest in the situation in Donbas also appeared relatively low, with neither Chancellor Angela Merkel, nor newly appointed foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel passing comment.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed concern about the resumption of hostilities in Donbas, and called for a ceasefire. At the same time, he appealed to Russia to use all possible influence to persuade the irregulars to cease their attacks.

Kate M. Byrnes, deputy head of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, issued a special statement to the OSCE Permanent Council. She described the violations of the ceasefire and gave examples of attacks on both sides. She defined as dramatic the situation of approximately 17,000 people, who may be cut off from electricity, water and heating as a result of these actions. The statement indicated that Russia-backed irregulars sought to destroy critical infrastructure in Ukraine.

The U.S. reaction has evolved. In a short statement on 31 January, the White House expressed concern for the Donbas population, repeating information given by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. However, "Russian support for the separatists," though originally featured in the OSCE statement, was not mentioned in the text. Shortly thereafter, Nikki Haley, U.S. ambassador to the UN, responded very strongly. At a special meeting of the UN Security Council on 2 February, she stressed the territorial integrity of Ukraine and called on Russia to end the occupation of Crimea immediately. Later, during a telephone conversation, Poroshenko and U.S. President Donald Trump expressed their concern about the situation in Donbas. This position was then repeated by the U.S. Vice President Mike Pence. However, when asked about the possibility of lifting sanctions against Russia, Pence suggested that this would depend on the outcome of cooperation between the U.S. and Russia in areas of common interest, such as the fight against the Islamic State.

Conclusions. It looks like Russia will aim at "freezing" the conflict in Donbas, even though this process will be slow. That is why new waves of hostilities and mutual accusations of violating the Minsk agreements should be expected.

Russia will strive to isolate Ukraine in the international arena, and its main aim will be to cut off EU and U.S. support for the country. The fact that the Trump Administration did not initially condemn the military action in Donbas indicates that the U.S. has not yet formulated a unified position regarding the conflict in Ukraine on one hand, and policy towards Russia on the other. This will be used by Moscow, which presents Ukraine in its propaganda as an almost failed state, aggressive and unable to cooperate. The lack of a unified U.S. position will favour Russia during future peace talks, as it means the Kremlin be able to ensure for itself the role of a main mediator, and to promote the irregulars as one of the parties to the peace talks.

Another Russian goal is that the U.S. and EU lift sanctions, especially those imposed because of Russian policy in Donbas. That is why Moscow will blame the Ukrainian authorities for the violation of the Minsk agreements. Russia will also attempt to drive a wedge between the U.S. and the EU, which previously had coherent policy. Such activities have a high chance of success due to the uncertainty in current relations between the U.S. and the EU, and because of the political situation within the EU. Upcoming elections in France and Germany mean these countries' elites will focus on domestic politics, avoiding any deeper references to international conflicts.

The deteriorating situation in Donbas may lead to another humanitarian disaster in the region. EU countries, including Poland, should increase their support for organisations working for the civilians from this area. Additional assistance for internally displaced persons in Ukraine should also be considered.