

# Ukraine Crisis Update: February 19, 2015

**1** February 13-14: Separatist forces drove the pro-Kyiv “Donbas” volunteer battalion out of the village of Lohvynove along the M03 highway, a key government-controlled supply route into Debaltseve. Ukrainian sources said the village was contested but that Ukrainian Anti-Terror Operation (ATO) forces were able to bypass the village into Debaltseve.

**2** February 15-18: Separatist forces, likely affiliated with the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR), shelled Ukrainian ATO positions on the outskirts of the city of Popasna, Luhansk Oblast. Two civilians were killed in “Grad” multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) strikes in the early hours of February 15, after the ceasefire was due to come into effect.

**3** February 15-19: Pro-Russian separatists fired tanks on Ukrainian forces near Shyrokyne, Donetsk Oblast. 5 members of the “Azov” Special Forces Regiment (Ukrainian National Guard) were killed and 18 were wounded along with 4 other Ukrainian fighters. Semen Semenchenko, commander of the pro-Kyiv “Donbas” volunteer battalion, said an infantry battle was taking place in Shyrokyne and his battalion, which also had units near Debaltseve, suffered several casualties in an ambush outside Mariupol. On February 19, a Ukrainian military spokesperson called Shyrokyne the “epicenter of hostilities” and reported “round-the-clock” shelling.

**4** February 16: According to the Ukrainian ATO press center, separatist militants shelled the Kyivskiy District of the DNR-controlled city of Donetsk. General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces speaker Vladyslav Seleznev said the DNR was attempting to portray the ATO forces as violators of the ceasefire by firing on separatist-controlled territory.

**5** February 16: Separatists, likely affiliated with the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) shelled a hospital in the Ukraine-controlled city of Shchastia with mortars, reportedly causing only material damage.

**6** February 18: Ukraine withdrew around 2,500 troops from the key city of Debaltseve. President Poroshenko denied that separatists had fully encircled the city and said the withdrawal took place in a “planned and organized manner.” Ukrainian military spokesman Andriy Lysenko described the withdrawal differently, saying ATO troops were forced to retreat via small roads under heavy fire from artillery, grenade launchers and tanks. The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces said 90 Ukrainian soldiers were captured by separatists during the clash around the city and 82 were missing. Kyiv said 13 soldiers were killed and 157 injured during the retreat. As of February 19, Ukraine said 90 percent of its troops had been withdrawn from the Debaltseve area.

**7** February 18: Separatist forces shelled the village of Luhanske, Donetsk Oblast, on the M03 highway between Artemivsk and Debaltseve, killing one civilian.

**8** February 18: Luhansk Oblast governor Hennadiy Moskal reported clashes involving mortars, heavy artillery, “Grad” multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), and tanks near the villages of Troitske and Chornukhyne, north and east of Debaltseve respectively. Pro-Russian Cossack forces, which often act independently from the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR), reportedly cut off these villages from Debaltseve in the week prior, creating small “cauldrons” within the larger Debaltseve cauldron. ATO forces were able to deliver humanitarian aid to the villages on February 15.

**9** February 18-19: Ukrainian Anti-Terror Operation (ATO) forces clashed with Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) separatists near the village of Pisky, immediately west of the destroyed Donetsk airport. Separatist sources claimed the DNR returned mortar fire in response to shelling from the pro-Kyiv forces, although this was not confirmed.

**10** February 19: Separatist forces launched mortar strikes on the outskirts of the city of Zolote, Luhansk Oblast near the contested Bakhmutka highway.



- Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR)
- Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR)
- Cossack
- Combined Separatist
- Ukrainian Anti-Terror Operation (ATO)
- ★ Acting Regional Admin Center
- ★ Regional Admin Center
- Separatist Held Territory
- ★ Major Clash
- ★ Indirect Fire



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Russia and Ukraine agreed to a ceasefire in Minsk, Belarus on February 12, while the Russian-backed separatist forces had nearly encircled the key city of Debaltseve. Ukrainian forces have now withdrawn from the city, a major loss for the Anti-Terror Operation (ATO) only three days after the start of the newly agreed ceasefire. Because Debaltseve is a highway and rail junction between the separatist-held regional capitals, its capture will enable further military coordination between the pro-Russian separatist groups known as the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR). This cooperation may lead to the formation of a united Russia-backed proxy state under the name “Novorossiya,” a long-stated goal of the separatists. Following the capture of Debaltseve, the separatists will likely turn their attention north of the city, toward the ATO headquarters in Kramatorsk and the former separatist stronghold of Sloviansk, and toward Mariupol in southern Donetsk Oblast.

The capture of Debaltseve represents a significant victory for Russia. Since the agreement was signed, Russian President Vladimir Putin has called on Ukrainian forces to surrender Debaltseve to the separatists surrounding the key city. While Ukraine and the West have condemned Russia’s support for the offensive in the form of Russian military hardware and regular Russian forces, neither are likely to view the loss of the city as a violation that terminates the ceasefire and its corollary requirements. Accordingly, President Putin has the luxury of choosing to accelerate Russian and separatist offensives in the south and north of Donetsk Oblast or to strengthen separatist positions over a protracted period of time as was done in the months following the September 2014 ceasefire. Discussions of possible U.S. military aid to Ukraine and an unlikely UN peacekeeping mission will likely accelerate Russian operational planning and the execution of offensives toward Mariupol, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, which would signal the end of Ukraine’s presence in Donetsk Oblast.