

# Ukraine Crisis Update: March 18, 2016

**1** March 1 - 12, 16 - 18: Ukraine's military reported intermittent separatist mortar fire east of the strategic port city of Mariupol. Russian-backed separatists targeted an increased number of Ukrainian positions and shelled at least seven villages in the area from March 1 - 2. Separatists fired an infantry fighting vehicle (IFV) on Ukrainian positions east of Mariupol on March 2.



**2** March 2 - 5, 14 - 18: Ukrainian mechanized forces repelled a separatist sabotage reconnaissance group backed by armor along the strategic Donetsk-Mariupol highway on March 2. Separatists fired mortars and an infantry fighting vehicle on Ukrainian forces east of the highway from March 4 - 5. Separatists from the "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR) fired tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and resumed mortar attacks on Ukrainian positions near the highway March 14 - 18, with a clash occurring on March 15.



**3** March 1 - 13: Separatists launched almost daily mortar fire on Ukrainian front line positions west of the occupied city of Donetsk. Ukraine's military reported coming under fire from separatist "Grad" multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) on March 3. Separatists launched mortar fire and the MLRS strikes against the government-held city of Krasnohorivka and village of Nevelske, west of "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR) occupied Donetsk airport. Separatists previously launched MLRS strikes west of Donetsk airport on February 16.



**4** March 4 - 18: Separatists intensified heavy artillery and daily indirect fire attacks on Ukrainian positions in Avdiivka, north of Donetsk city beginning March 4. A separatist sabotage reconnaissance group backed by armor clashed with Ukrainian forces on March 7, and the Ukrainian military repelled another sabotage and reconnaissance group of ten separatists on March 10. Separatist forces launched rare heavy artillery attacks from March 9-13. Separatists targeted Ukrainian positions with tank fire from March 11, 12 and 16, and infantry fighting vehicle fire on March 11 and 16.



**5** March 1-18: Separatist forces launched intermittent indirect fire attacks on Ukrainian positions north of Horlivka, a key front line city occupied by the "DNR." The Ukrainian military reported infantry fighting vehicle fire west of Horlivka on March 9, 11 and 15.



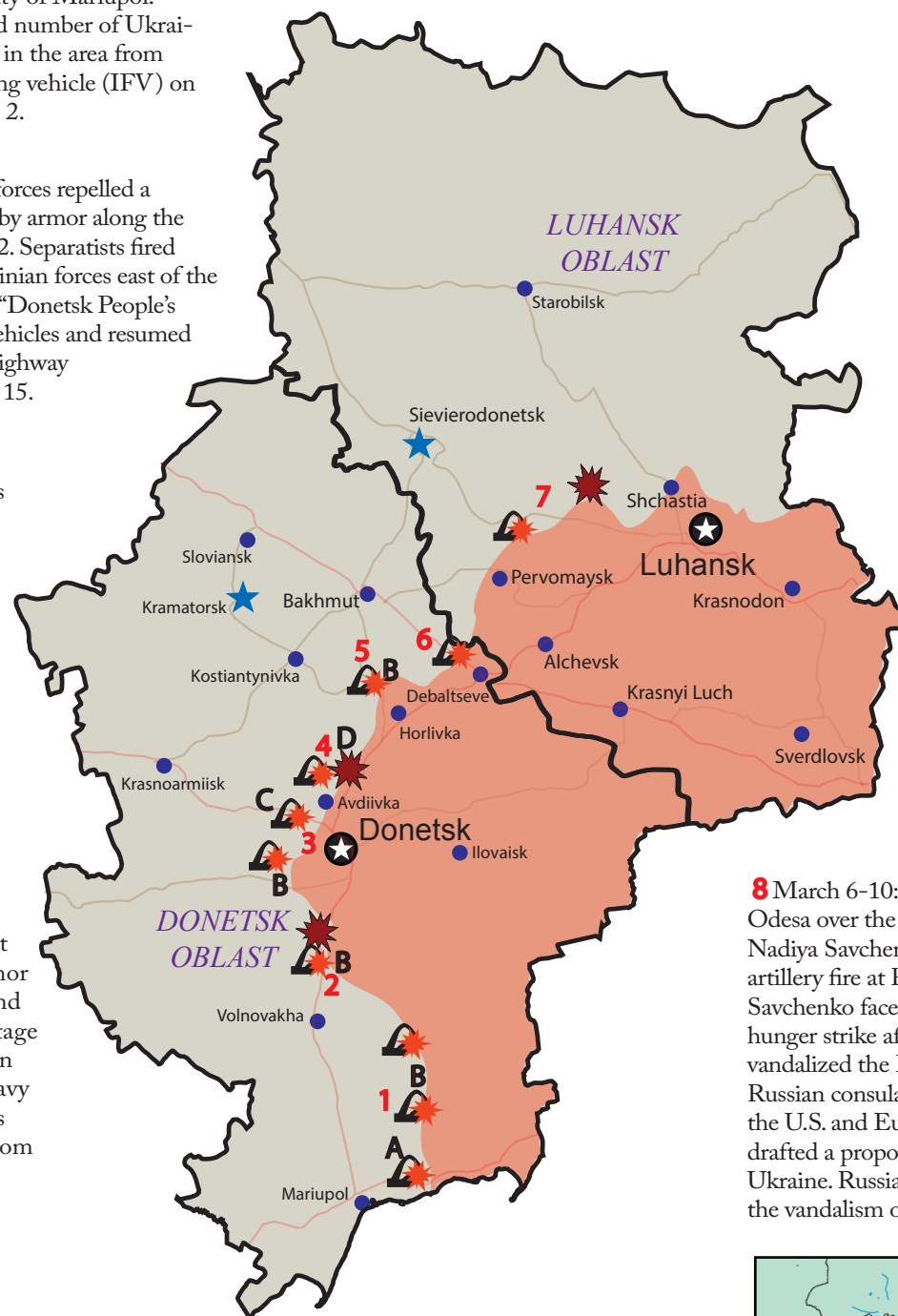
**6** March 6 - 18: Russian backed separatists launched intermittent indirect fire attacks on Ukrainian positions March 6 - 13 and 18 and intermittently fired infantry fighting vehicles along the Debaltseve - Bakhmut highway from March 8 - 18.



**7** March 8, 10, 13 - 14: Separatists attacked Ukrainian positions along the frontline Donets River northwest of Luhansk city. Three Ukrainian soldiers were KIA and five WIA on March 1 due to separatist attacks and a roadside mine explosion. A group of ten separatists clashed with Ukrainian forces along the frontline Donets River on March 10, the site of a previous attempt to overtake a Ukrainian military observation post by five separatists on March 8. Separatists fired mortars on Ukrainian positions south of the river on the contested "Bakhmutka" highway in western Luhansk Oblast from March 13 - 14.



**8** March 6-10: Protestors held demonstrations in Kyiv, Lviv and Odesa over the detention and continued trial of Ukrainian POW Nadiya Savchenko, jailed in Russia on charges of directing artillery fire at Russian journalists in Luhansk Oblast in 2014. Savchenko faces up to 23 years in prison and announced a dry hunger strike after her trial was delayed on March 3. Protestors vandalized the Russian embassy in Kyiv on March 6 and 10, and Russian consulates in Odesa and Lviv on March 9. Leaders from the U.S. and Europe called for Savchenko's immediate release and drafted a proposed EU sanctions list to demand her return to Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov condemned the vandalism of Russian diplomatic facilities in Ukraine.



- Donetsk People's Republic (DNR)
- Luhansk People's Republic (LNR)
- Ukrainian Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO)
- ☄ Indirect Fire
- ☄ Clash
- ☄ Battle
- Separatist-held Territory
- ★ Regional Admin Center
- ★ Acting Regional Admin Center

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Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely attempting to leverage his gains in the Syrian Civil War to expand Russia's freedom of action in eastern Ukraine. Russia and the separatists began to escalate operations in eastern Ukraine in mid-February, directly coinciding with the implementation of the Syrian cessation of hostilities agreement on February 27 and subsequent drawdown of Russian forces. The Syrian and Ukrainian theaters have been linked before. In September 2015, the Ukrainian military reported a partial withdrawal of heavy artillery and armor from the front line and a decrease in clashes with Russian-backed separatist forces, coinciding with Russia's launch of its air campaign in Syria. Putin again directly linked the two theaters in his March 14 phone call with President Barack Obama on the Russian drawdown in Syria, stressing "the need for the complete fulfilment of the Minsk Agreements by the Ukrainian authorities."

Russia and its proxies have escalated operations involving re-deployed heavy weapons in eastern Ukraine in February and March in order to set conditions for future operations and to test the levels of escalation the international community is willing to overlook. Russian-backed separatists likely intend to target multiple pressure points in order to stretch Ukrainian forces along the separatists' western front in an attempt to disguise their intentions about which single position they intend to prioritize.

Specifically, separatists based around Donetsk city, who had concentrated fire on government positions to its west in February, redirected their attacks north of the stronghold in early March. Separatists escalated attacks on Avdiivka, north of Donetsk city, firing rare heavy artillery, tanks, and mortars and clashing with Ukrainian troops starting March 4. Separatists also launched "Grad" multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), banned from the front line by the "Minsk II" ceasefire agreement, west of Donetsk airport on March 3 and on February 16, showing their intention to escalate the conflict despite the ceasefire. Despite a mid-February withdrawal of separatist forces from a long-contested village east of Mariupol, separatists increased the scope of indirect fire attacks on Ukrainian positions east and northeast of the strategic port city. The tandem escalation of attacks in close proximity to the most populated government-controlled city in the region and Donetsk city may increase pressure on the Ukrainian government to make political concessions tied to the "Minsk II" ceasefire agreement, including recognizing the special legal status of occupied Donbas, in an effort to deescalate the conflict.

Heightened separatist operations in March are part of a larger trend of escalation since December 2015. Separatists have phased their operations as follows:

- A** December 2015; January-March 2016: Separatists seize uncontrolled village of Kominternove, east of Mariupol; separatists increase mortar attacks east of Mariupol
- B** February-March 2016: Separatists target frontline government-controlled civilian checkpoints (northeast of Mariupol, south and west of Donetsk city, north of Horlivka)
- C** February 16 and March 3, 2016: Separatists launch "Grad" MLRS (northwest of Donetsk city)
- D** March 4, 2016: Separatists shift focus of offensive operations from west to north of Donetsk city

The unenforced "Minsk II" ceasefire agreement grants Western leaders an attractive non-military response to limiting Russian aggression through negotiations, supported by strict U.S. and European economic sanctions. The "Minsk II" agreement, however, has allowed Russia to expand its political and military leverage over Ukraine. Russia is a belligerent posing as a mediator and can increase and decrease violence in order to coerce Ukraine into concessions. President Putin continues to blame hostilities along the front line on the Ukrainian authorities' failure to uphold political obligations under the "Minsk II" ceasefire. European leaders' support for maintaining sanctions may be weakening; the German and French economy ministers have made statements this year supporting the lifting of sanctions in the near term. The foreign ministers of Germany and France, who may prioritize the resolution of the Syrian Civil War over the war in eastern Ukraine, recently expressed hope that Ukraine would allow elections to be held in occupied Donbas by June 2016.

Putin is taking steps to change political as well as military realities on the ground. The separatist "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR) began issuing its own passports on March 16, a landmark in Russian-backed efforts to transform the occupied regions of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts into polities. The leaders of the DNR claimed the passports would be required to participate in local elections in the occupied region, thereby excluding internally displaced persons and pro-Ukrainian individuals from the vote. Despite Russia publicly not recognizing the DNR as an independent state, the move may have been approved by President Putin to undermine Western-backed efforts to arrange elections in occupied territory in accordance with Ukrainian law and OSCE standards.

Russia will likely support political and military escalation in eastern Ukraine in the coming months while painting Kyiv as the spoiler of the ceasefire. Russian-backed separatists will continue to gradually escalate indirect fire attacks on Ukrainian positions and shift operations along the front near Donetsk city and Mariupol. Russia may privately support preparations for separatist pseudo-elections in 2016 in an attempt to bolster the legitimacy of its proxies. Previous separatist elections were held in November 2014 without Ukrainian approval, and the threat of another round of elections may be used as a bargaining chip during ceasefire negotiations. Western leaders previously engaged Russia to postpone separatist elections during the operational pause in eastern Ukraine in Fall 2015 and might again ask Russia to make this temporary concession, giving Putin leverage to request concessions from the West and from Kyiv.