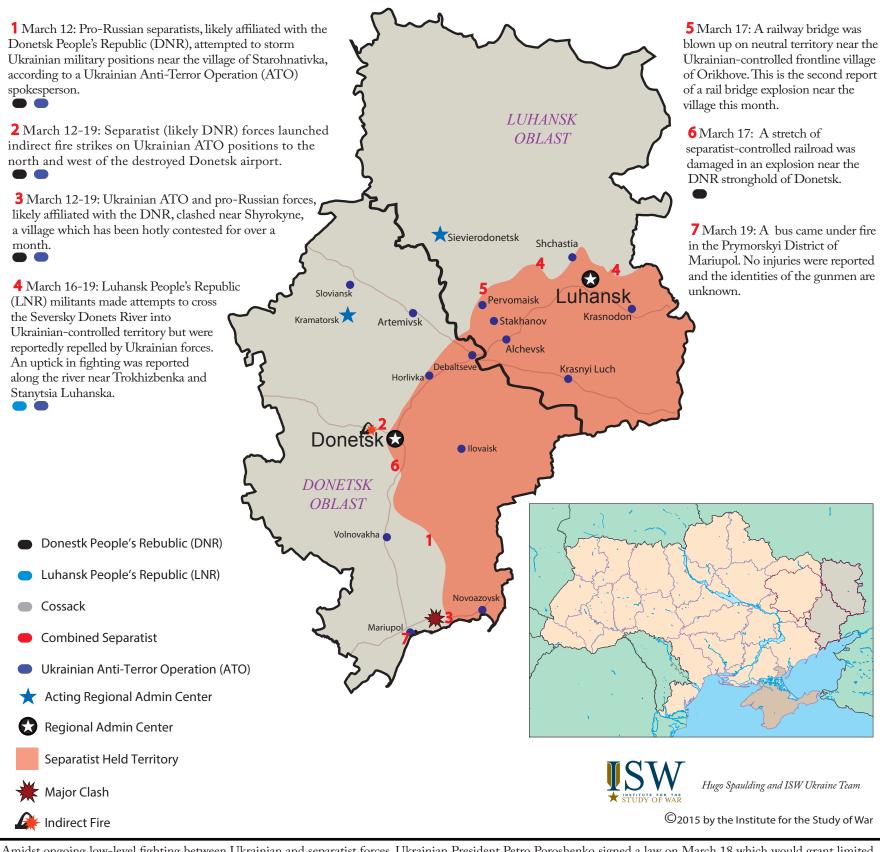
Ukraine Crisis Update: March 19, 2015



Amidst ongoing low-level fighting between Ukrainian and separatist forces, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko signed a law on March 18 which would grant limited autonomy to many areas under separatist control. The law is contingent on the implementation of internationally monitored elections in accordance with Ukrainian law. Although both Moscow and the separatists have demanded that Kyiv pass an autonomy law, a key stipulation of the February 12 ceasefire agreement, both have condemned the new legislation because it effectively bars the leadership of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) from participating in the local elections. Should the law be implemented, it would define a border between Ukrainian-controlled Donbas and an autonomous region with only loose affiliation to the central government. The requisite of Kyiv-approved elections and the notable exclusion of Debaltseve, a transit hub connecting Donetsk and Luhansk, from the list of autonomous territories will likely prevent the law from taking effect. Instead, Russia and the separatists may use the law as pretext for the renewal of major offensive operations while placing the blame on Kyiv for violating the ceasefire deal.

On the same day, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a security and economic integration agreement with South Ossetia, a Russian-backed breakaway Georgian state, all but annexing the territory. The deal was signed on the one-year anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea, where this week Russia announced it would deploy nuclear-capable bombers. Against the backdrop of military drills in the Artic and military flights over the Baltic Sea, Russia's agreement with South Ossetia sends a defiant message to NATO ahead of the start of a U.S. training mission in Ukraine.