

Ukraine Crisis Update: March 19, 2015

1 March 12: Pro-Russian separatists, likely affiliated with the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), attempted to storm Ukrainian military positions near the village of Starohnativka, according to a Ukrainian Anti-Terror Operation (ATO) spokesperson.



2 March 12-19: Separatist (likely DNR) forces launched indirect fire strikes on Ukrainian ATO positions to the north and west of the destroyed Donetsk airport.



3 March 12-19: Ukrainian ATO and pro-Russian forces, likely affiliated with the DNR, clashed near Shyrokyne, a village which has been hotly contested for over a month.



4 March 16-19: Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) militants made attempts to cross the Seversky Donets River into Ukrainian-controlled territory but were reportedly repelled by Ukrainian forces. An uptick in fighting was reported along the river near Trokhizbenka and Stanytsia Luhanska.



5 March 17: A railway bridge was blown up on neutral territory near the Ukrainian-controlled frontline village of Orikhove. This is the second report of a rail bridge explosion near the village this month.

6 March 17: A stretch of separatist-controlled railroad was damaged in an explosion near the DNR stronghold of Donetsk.



7 March 19: A bus came under fire in the Prymorskyi District of Mariupol. No injuries were reported and the identities of the gunmen are unknown.



- 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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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 Arctic 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.