Ukraine Crisis Update: July 29, 2015

1 July 23- 28: The leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France agreed to demilitarize the village of Shyrokyne, a major flashpoint east of Mariupol, after a July 23 phone conference. On July 27, the OSCE international monitoring mission came under fire in Shyrokyne from a position northeast of the village, an area occupied by the separatists. One OSCE observer was injured, reportedly the first such incident during the conflict. The OSCE called the direct targeting of its mission, which came one day after a similar incident near Shchastia, Luhansk Oblast, a "new phenomenon" and said it was reviewing the safety of its operations. Ukraine's military continues to report intermittent attacks in Shyrokyne and nearby areas, despite the July 2 withdrawal of the separatists from the village. Ukraine withdrew its volunteer national guardsmen from Shyrokyne on July 27 and replaced them with naval infantry. The replacement of the volunteer forces, many of whom are vocal opponents of demilitarizing the area, with the less autonomous naval infantry may signal Ukraine's intention to withdraw its forces and demilitarize the village in the near future. Ukraine's military spokesman reported on July 28, however, that the naval infantry were in a state of "full battle readiness" following the attack on the OSCE mission.

2 July 23-28: Separatists shelled Ukrainian positions east of and along the strategic Donetsk-Mariupol highway with heavy weapons.

3 July 26: Residents of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR)-controlled city of Donetsk reported the shelling of residential districts of the city.

4 July 23-29: Separatists continue to shell Ukrainian frontline positions west of Donetsk, near Marinka and Krasnohorivka, which the separatists assaulted on June 3

5 July 22-29: Separatists continued daily shelling of Ukrainian positions north of Donetsk city around the DNR-held Donetsk Airport. On July 27, separatists targeted the nearby Ukrainian-held villages of Opytne and Vodiane with "Grad" multiple launch rocket systems. On July 28, around 30 separatists attacked a Ukrainian military position around Avdiivka, the site of the country's largest producer of petroleum coke, a key input for steel factories in the region, , but were repelled.

6 July 22-28: Separatists continued daily shelling of Ukrainian positions west and north of DNR-controlled Horlivka. The DNR blamed Ukrainian forces for the shelling, which reportedly killed two civilians in Horlivka.
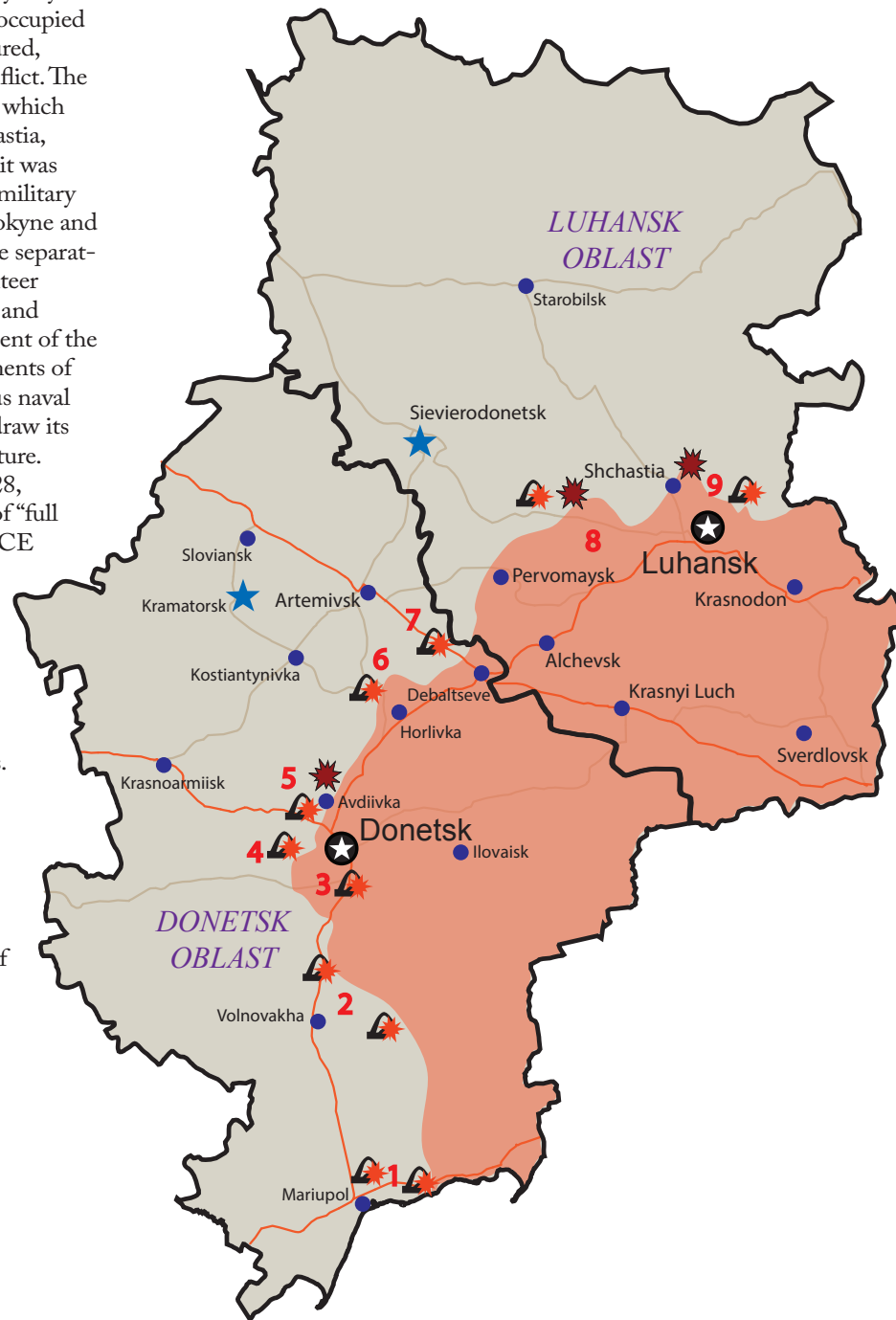
7 July 23-29: Separatists continued to shell Ukrainian positions along the highway between Debaltseve, captured by the separatists on February 18, and Artemivsk, a key gateway to government-controlled northern Donetsk Oblast. Separatists also targeted Ukrainian positions around the government-held city of Popasna, east of the highway, with indirect fire.

8 July 23-28: Separatists targeted Ukrainian positions east of Luhansk city along the contested T1303 "Bakhmutka" highway. Separatists, likely affiliated with the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), clashed with Ukrainian forces north of the highway on July 27, injuring one Ukrainian soldier.

9 July 23-28: Separatists conducted daily indirect fire attacks on Ukrainian positions near Stanytsia Luhanska, a Ukrainian frontline town east of LNR-controlled Luhansk city close to the Russian border. Separatists also targeted Ukrainian positions at the city of Shchastia, north of Luhansk, the site of a thermal electrical plant which was damaged in the shelling. On July 26, the OSCE Monitoring Mission reported that it was caught in an indirect fire exchange between Ukrainian and separatist forces in Shchastia. On July 28, a separatist force of around 100 militants attacked Ukrainian positions at Shchastia under cover of tank and artillery for around three hours before retreating.

Legend

- Donestk People's Rebublic (DNR)
- Luhansk People's Republic (LNR)
- Ukrainian Anti-Terrorism Operation (ATO)
- Indirect Fire
- Clash
- Battle
- Separatist-held Territory
- Regional Admin Center
- Acting Regional Admin Center

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Russian-backed separatists have intensified the scale of attacks on Ukrainian positions along the front line in Donbas undermining their recent efforts to advertise their "peaceful intentions." On July 27, separatists attacked Ukrainian forces near the government-controlled frontline city of Avdiivka, north of the separatist-held regional capital of Donetsk, and deployed "Grad" multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) for the first time in at least two weeks. Clashes were also reported near the government-controlled frontline city of Shchastia, north of the separatist-held regional capital of Luhansk. On July 28, a separatist unit consisting of approximately 30 fighters attacked Ukrainian forces near Avdiivka, while another separatist force consisting of 100 fighters attacked Ukrainian forces near Shchastia. Taken together, these assaults along the front line appear to reflect coordinated separatist offensive operations of an intensity not witnessed in recent weeks. This uptick in separatist offensive activity comes a week after separatist forces began withdrawing armor and light artillery from the front line following a preliminary agreement with Kyiv. The intensification also coincided with growing indications that Kyiv would withdraw its forces and weapons from the village of Shyrokyne, a key flashpoint east of the strategic port city of Mariupol. While separatist forces withdrew from Shyrokyne on July 2 as a "demonstration of their peaceful intentions" and called for its demilitarization, the separatist attack on an OSCE monitoring crew in the village this week indicates that they have little intention of deescalating the conflict before achieving their political objectives. The separatists are likely to maintain offensive operations to apply pressure on Kyiv as negotiations over the provision of political autonomy to the separatist-held regions continue, as they did on July 28. Meanwhile, the separatists will also likely continue to publicize their willingness to negotiate and deescalate the conflict in an effort to degrade the internationally accepted narrative that they are the chief violators of the ceasefire.