

RUSSIAN-BACKED OFFENSIVE IN UKRAINE LOOMS AS CEASEFIRE BREAKS

Russian-backed separatist forces are on the brink of a renewed offensive in eastern Ukraine. The redeployment of banned heavy weapons to the front line, reports of an increasing regular Russian military presence, and the intensification of separatist attacks on Ukrainian military positions suggest that pro-Russian forces are preparing to rupture the framework of the February 12 ceasefire agreement. The arrival of U.S. military trainers in Ukraine increases Washington's stake in the deteriorating security situation and may be exploited by the Kremlin to justify a pro-Russian offensive around Victory Day on May 9, 2015.

Russian-backed separatist forces are preparing for an offensive in southeastern Ukraine. Since early April, the separatists have begun redeploying heavy weapons to the front line, and separatist attacks have increased in intensity. Reports of regular Russian forces in the conflict zone have also increased. The arrival of three Russian uninspected aid convoys and at least at least Russian rail shipments in April 2015, all thought to include military vehicles and equipment, serve as additional indicators that pro-Russian forces are preparing to re-launch offensive operations possibly in concert with Victory Day celebrations on May 9.¹

The redeployment of heavy weapons by the self-styled Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) suggests that these separatist groups are positioning themselves to launch an offensive. Separatist and Ukrainian forces had withdrawn a significant amount of heavy artillery, mortars and rocket systems in accordance with the February 12, 2015 Minsk II ceasefire agreement; however, on April 18, 2015, "Grad" rocket fire hit residential areas of the Ukrainian-held frontline city of Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast and the Stanytsia-Luhanska district of Luhansk Oblast.² The international monitoring team from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) additionally reported on April 20 that four "Grad" Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) had been removed from separatist storage sites. DNR and LNR sources have claimed the missing heavy weapons were taken out of storage in preparation for a May 9 Victory Day parade, which commemorates the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany.³ The OSCE also observed tanks, MLRS, and heavy artillery within the prescribed buffer zone and has said that the redeployment of banned heavy weapons even in the context of a demonstration would represent a violation of the ceasefire agreement.⁴ The redeployment of the weapons and the allusion to Victory Day military demonstrations suggest that separatists are preparing to rupture the framework of the ceasefire agreement in the coming weeks.

Other indicators of an offensive are more nuanced and require contextual background about the first ceasefire agreement,

which collapsed in January 2015 due to a sequenced Russian-backed offensive. The indicators that characterized the early warning for that earlier offensive are now observable again in April 2015. These indicators include the concentration of forces and indirect fire strikes on a few priority targets, an increased presence of regular Russian forces and command and control elements, and an intensification of attacks on civilian areas. Pro-Russian activity in April 2015 has satisfied these three indicators to varying degrees, suggesting that Russian-backed forces will again attack despite the ceasefire agreement in place.

Representatives from Ukraine, Russia, and the separatists signed the first Minsk ceasefire agreement on September 5, 2014, following two major pro-Russian victories, which reversed the tide of the war.⁵ Neither side withdrew all of their heavy weapons to the distance prescribed by the ceasefire agreement addendum established on September 19.⁶ The failure to enforce the withdrawal allowed the separatists to launch daily indirect fire strikes on Ukrainian positions for the first four months of the ceasefire. These strikes kept Ukrainian forces engaged and softened their defenses in areas of strategic importance to pro-Russian forces, in particular the Donetsk airport and Debaltseve. The daily shelling also covered an operational pause, which allowed the separatist leadership to pursue political objectives, including organizing local elections and cleansing rival separatist commanders. Russia was able to withdraw forces inserted into the successful sieges of the Azov Sea town of Novoazovsk and the rail hub of Ilovaisk in the buildup to the ceasefire.⁷

The conflict reached an inflection point in January 2015, when Russian-backed separatists launched a successful week-long offensive maneuver to seize the Donetsk airport, a key forward position of Ukrainian forces on the outskirts of separatist-held Donetsk.⁸ Pro-Russian forces immediately sequenced an offensive maneuver to encircle Debaltseve, a key Ukrainian-held rail hub between separatist capitals Donetsk and Luhansk.⁹ The dramatic escalation of pro-Russian offensive operations in

January and February 2015 prompted Ukrainian and European leaders to sit at the negotiating table with Russia and negotiate the second ceasefire agreement in Minsk, Belarus.¹⁰

The Minsk II agreement allowed pro-Russian forces to pause operationally during a temporary de-escalation of the fighting. The agreement officially came into effect on February 15 but it did not prevent pro-Russian forces from capturing Debaltseve three days later.¹¹ Both sides began withdrawing heavy weapons following the battle for Debaltseve in accordance with the ceasefire agreement. Clashes, including with tanks as well as infantry, persisted despite the ceasefire in the village of Shyrokyne, around 10 kilometers east of the key Ukrainian port city of Mariupol.¹² Separatists subjected Ukrainian forces to frequent shelling near the destroyed Donetsk airport, increasingly with banned heavy weapons.¹³ Firefights continued across the frontline in Luhansk Oblast recently concentrating along the Т1303 “Bakhmutka” highway.¹⁴

Separatist military activity has shifted from dispersed skirmishes and indirect fire to concentrated efforts around three key areas over the past two weeks. These three areas, namely, the surroundings of the Donetsk airport, Mariupol and the Bakhmutka highway in Luhansk Oblast, are all priority targets for the separatists. The intensification of fighting around these areas since early April 2015 suggests that separatists are concentrating their forces and weapons around these strategic points in preparation of an offensive on one front or a sequenced offensive on multiple fronts. The pattern of reorganizing dispersed forces into concentrated formations oriented on a set of key targets is similar to the pattern seen in January 2015 prior to the launch of offensive operations.

Ukrainian military and government officials have increasingly reported the presence of Russian soldiers and military personnel in the occupied territory of Donbas including in the context of cleansing and training operations.¹⁵ The U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine reported in April 2015 that Russia was retaining command and control elements in eastern Ukraine.¹⁶ The U.S. State Department reported that the presence of Russian air defense systems in Donbas and Russian forces on the Ukrainian border was the highest since August and October 2014 respectively.¹⁷ Russian military leaders may be operating in a command and control capacity within the framework of a joint Ukrainian-Russian-separatist working group, which has been active near Shyrokyne and recently announced plans to open an observation post near the Donetsk airport.¹⁸ The group, which includes the deputy commander of Russia’s airborne forces and previously included the deputy commander Russia’s ground forces, was headquartered in Debaltseve but the Russian delegation abandoned the headquarters in January immediately before the launch of an offensive maneuver on the city, suggesting prior knowledge of the operation and possibly coordination of the siege.¹⁹

A sharp intensification of separatist attacks on civilian targets accompanied the launch of offensive maneuvers in January and

February 2015.²⁰ During the Minsk II ceasefire period, civilians have largely escaped shelling. Recent rocket and mortar strikes on residential areas of the Ukrainian-held city of Avdiivka, north of the Donetsk airport, give an early suggestion that separatists may again target civilians in order to clear populated areas in preparation for a siege.²¹

Pro-Russian forces are likely to escalate attacks on Ukrainian military positions and possibly civilian areas in the north and west of the Donetsk airport over the next month possibly contemporaneously with Victory Day celebrations. Pro-Russian forces may launch a maneuver to push Ukrainian forces out of the villages of Pisky and Opytne and position themselves to conduct a siege of the city of Avdiivka. An offensive to capture areas east of Mariupol may be sequenced with an operation near Donetsk airport. These offensives would signal the collapse of the ceasefire agreement and leave separatists in a better position to encircle the biggest Ukrainian-held city in Donbas, namely, Mariupol. This encirclement is unlikely to take place immediately and would be preceded by separatist operations to seize Ukrainian positions on the H20 highway between Donetsk and Mariupol. The capture of Mariupol would represent the most significant pro-Russian military victory in the hybrid war in Donbas and would allow Russia to create a land bridge to the Crimean peninsula.

Separatist and Russian forces may blame the April arrival of U.S. paratroopers in western Ukraine for escalating fighting in the southeast. The Kremlin has already said the arrival of U.S. forces “could destabilize the situation” in Ukraine as part of a long-standing effort to cast the West as the outside aggressor in the conflict.²² The Kremlin may wish to send a stern message to Washington that it is highly sensitive to increases in Western military involvement in Ukraine. The Kremlin’s rhetoric should not obfuscate the reality that Russia has pursued these operational objectives through aggressive military actions since long before 290 U.S. paratroopers arrived in this training mission.²³

A renewed pro-Russian offensive could force Ukraine back to the negotiating table with Russia and the separatists on adverse terms. Kyiv may be forced to make political concessions to bring about a new ceasefire, possibly by recognizing the autonomy of separatist-held territory in Donbas and the authority of the separatist leadership to govern. A new ceasefire agreement could also have geopolitical consequences for Ukraine and could possibly be tied to the deferral of its EU trade agreement beyond 2016. Ukraine has few military cards of its own left to play and will continue to lobby the West for lethal aid. The West may again decline to significantly boost Ukraine’s defenses by instead ignoring Russian and separatist military objectives and placing unfounded faith in the ceasefire.

Minsk II Ceasefire Flashpoints: February 25-April 25

- ★ Acting Regional Admin Center
- ★ Regional Admin Center
- Separatist Held Territory
- ★ Areas of Significant Kinetic Activity



Graphics: Hugo Spaulding

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NOTES

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