

III. External intervention in the Ukraine conflict: towards a frozen conflict in the Donbas

ANDREW WILSON

Although a baseline for civil conflict existed in eastern Ukraine in late 2013, most of the key triggers that transformed a situation of local conflict into violence and war—the appearance of first paramilitary and then military forces, huge amounts of arms as well as financial and organizational resources—were externally sourced. More specifically, they were supplied by Russia or by supporters of Viktor Yanukovich, the Russia-backed President of Ukraine deposed in 2014. Furthermore, the most important effect of Russian intervention was to provoke the *onset* of war. The Russian intervention has also prolonged the conflict and made a negotiated settlement harder to achieve. While Western powers have been unable or unwilling to intervene to the same degree, their belated assistance to Ukraine has helped strengthen the Ukrainian side's ability to fight and has, therefore, also contributed to prolonging the conflict. Unilateral intervention, as defined by Karlén, means 'intervention by a third-party government in an internal armed conflict in favour of either the government or the opposition movement'. This section looks at developments in the Ukraine conflict in 2014–15, paying special attention to the role of unilateral intervention.

The origins of the conflict in Ukraine

Domestic sources of conflict

Many commentators have depicted the conflict in eastern Ukraine as a civil war, with partial or primarily domestic sources.¹ The initial causes of the conflict as well as the extent of Russia's role have been hotly contested.² Analysts such as Elise Giuliano have focused primarily on internal Ukrainian factors, which left some in eastern Ukraine—in particular the Donbas region, made up of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts—alienated from the three months of Euromaidan protests of late 2013 and early 2014. Giuliano's list of conflict antecedents includes: 'claims of discriminatory redistribution within Ukraine'; 'perceptions of the negative effect of potential [European Union, EU] membership on economic welfare'; 'a sense of betrayal by Kyiv'; the government's condemnation of and dissolution of the Berkut special

¹ Kudelia, S., 'Domestic sources of the Donbas insurgency', PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo no. 351, Sep. 2014; and Arel, D. and Driscoll, J., 'The civil war in Ukraine', draft paper in preparation; see also a video of the authors' presentation at Danyliw Seminar, 'Arel D & Driscoll J Conceptualizing the War in Donbas', YouTube, 23 Oct. 2015.

² See also Anthony, I., Perlo-Freeman, S. and Wezeman, S. T., 'The Ukraine conflict and its implications', *SIPRI Yearbook 2015*, pp. 55–67.

police, many of whom came from the Donbas region; the government's failure to renounce extreme right-wing Ukrainian nationalists; and the new Ukrainian Parliament's attempt to annul the law on Russian language.³

Yuri Zhukov contends that predominantly economic motives are behind the local grievances in the civil conflict in Ukraine. He argues that anti-Kyiv resistance was strongest in areas dominated by industrial manufacturing, which was most at risk from any disruption of trade with Russia—and from Russian sanctions.⁴

Whether grievances were political or economic, a key opinion poll taken in April 2014 found the baseline of support for 'separation from Ukraine and union with Russia' in the Donbas region to be 27.5 per cent in Donetsk and 30.3 per cent in Luhansk (but only 11.9 per cent and 13.2 per cent definitely in each).⁵ Another poll in March 2014, this time in Donetsk alone, showed a similar picture. A total of 31.6 per cent supported separatist options: 8.7 per cent favoured Ukraine joining Russia or a restored Soviet Union, 18.2 per cent backed Donetsk joining Russia and 4.7 per cent wanted it to be independent. However, 50.2 per cent favoured 'Ukrainian' options: 18.6 per cent supported the status quo of a unitary Ukraine while 31.6 per cent opted for more decentralization. In the middle, 15.5 per cent backed a federal Ukraine, although almost half saw this as implying a right to separation.⁶

Serhiy Kudelia has stressed a combination of 'popular emotions specific to the region—resentment and fear' combined with 'political factors—state fragmentation, violent regime change, and the government's low coercive capacity' to 'launch the armed secessionist movement'. Other scholars similarly emphasize 'regime collapse' in Kyiv.⁷ The weakness of the Ukrainian state was clearly an important but variable factor. While political elites in neighbouring cities like Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk were able to impose order, the Ukrainian state's coercive capacity in the Donbas region was noticeably weaker.⁸ This is in part because it was those same authorities and elites that had previously maintained public order and supported Yanukovich that organized to disrupt it.⁹ In addition, the GRU (Russian military foreign intelligence) played a role in organizing local demonstrations and in bussing in Russian 'tourists' from over the border, although more research

³ Giuliano, E., 'The origins of separatism: popular grievances in Donetsk and Luhansk', Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo no. 396, Oct. 2015.

⁴ Zhukov, Y., 'Trading hard hats for combat helmets: the economics of rebellion in eastern Ukraine', *Journal of Comparative Economics*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Feb. 2016), pp. 1–15.

⁵ [The thoughts and opinions of inhabitants of south-east Ukraine: April 2014], *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, 18 Apr. 2014 (in Russian).

⁶ Kipen, V.P., [Traumatized consciousness as a consequence and factor of instability (research of mass moods in Donetsk)], *Skhid*, no. 2, 2014 (in Ukrainian).

⁷ Kudelia (note 1).

⁸ Portnov, A., 'How "eastern Ukraine" was lost', *Open Democracy*, 14 Jan. 2016.

⁹ Shynkarenko, O., 'Who's funding East Ukraine militancy?', *IWPR*, 16 May 2014.

is needed on the extent of such involvement.¹⁰ In contrast, external actors supporting the interim Ukrainian Government were often passive players. Moreover, Western diplomats—concerned that a tougher response to the separatists would provoke Russia—urged restraint.¹¹

Nonetheless, overall state weakness was clearly perceived by all actors. The release of the minutes of the meeting of Ukraine’s National Security and Defence Council on 28 February 2014, the day after Russian began its invasion of Crimea, showed just how weak Ukraine was militarily. The new Ukrainian Minister of Defence, Ihor Tenukh, reported that Russia had 38 000 troops on the border. Ukraine had only 5000 combat-ready soldiers, not even enough to defend Kyiv, which he estimated Russia could reach in 3–3.5 hours. Ukraine also had 1500–2000 soldiers in Crimea, facing at least 25 000 troops from Russia’s Black Sea Fleet.

Russia’s calculations

The evidence strongly suggests that Russia’s interventions in 2014 were decisive in turning a local conflict into a protracted war. Russia’s motivations for intervening were complex. In Russian President Vladimir Putin’s key speech on 18 March 2014 after the annexation of Crimea he claimed to be reacting to attempts ‘to deprive Russians of their historical memory, even of their language and to subject them to forced assimilation. Moreover, Russians, just as other citizens of Ukraine are suffering from the constant political and state crisis that has been rocking the country for over 20 years’.¹² Logically, however, that thinking should have led Russian-speaking Ukraine, not just the Donbas, into deeper involvement in the conflict. The more deep-rooted reasons for Russia’s actions were its fears of a post-Euromaidan Ukraine moving closer to the EU and even the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); but this was a distant prospect at best, not an imminent threat.¹³

Putin called the events in Kyiv in late 2013 and early 2014 an ‘anti-constitutional coup and a military seizure of power’.¹⁴ In speeches in 2015 he put more stress on the broader context, condemning any threat to the established order or to ‘impose any sort of values [the West] considers correct on anyone. We have our own values, our own conceptions of justice’.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Russia’s actions were not designed to support the constitutional status quo.

¹⁰ [About Putin’s ‘tourists’ or the war of small groups], *Informatsionnoe soprotilvenie*, 30 July 2015.

¹¹ Borger, J., ‘US offers Ukraine non-lethal military aid but urges Kiev to act responsibly’, *The Guardian*, 17 Apr. 2014; and *Kyiv Post*, ‘April 17 statements of John Kerry, Catherine Ashton in Geneva’, 18 Apr. 2014.

¹² Address by President of the Russian Federation, The Kremlin, Moscow, 18 Mar. 2014.

¹³ Trenin, D., ‘The crisis in Crimea could lead the world into a second cold war’, *The Guardian*, 2 Mar. 2014.

¹⁴ BBC News, ‘Putin on Ukraine crisis: “It is an unconstitutional coup”’, 4 Mar. 2014.

¹⁵ Sputnik International, ‘Putin shares his view on Russia’s role in emerging World Order’, 20 Dec. 2015.

GRU agents were already reportedly present in eastern Ukraine prior to the February 2014 flight of government officials from the country, primarily to Russia, in the wake of the Euromaidan protests. The presence of other Russian activities in the Donetsk Oblast throughout 2014 is well documented, including the arrival of pro-separatist fighters generally known as the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), led by a former Russian Army veteran, Igor Girkin, in Sloviansk in April. This was followed by a huge increase in the number of 'volunteers' from Russia in response to Girkin's appeals for support, as well as an increased supply of weapons from Russia and artillery fire from the Russian-side of the border in June, and the participation of regular Russian units in the fighting by the end of July.¹⁶ On 17 July Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, a civilian airliner flying in Ukrainian airspace, was shot down, reportedly by a Russian-supplied Buk-M1 rocket system, and Girkin claimed responsibility.¹⁷ This was followed by the reported heavy involvement of Russian forces in key battles at Ilovaisk in August 2014 and Debaltseve in February 2015.¹⁸ In other words, the evidence points to a progressive escalation in Russia's involvement in the conflict. Russia's progressive approach had its disadvantages—chief among them the time it afforded the Ukrainian Army to organize itself after its disastrous start in February 2014.

Russia's escalation was not matched by any re-definition of its aims. These remained unclear as Russia never clearly settled for one of many overlapping options. The much feared full-scale invasion of Ukraine did not materialize, but Russia's constant mobilization and exercises on its side of the border served to intimidate Ukraine and divert its scarce forces.¹⁹ The most important effect of these exercises was probably to increase Western diplomatic pressure on Ukraine to avoid 'provoking' Russia. Fighters affiliated with the DNR, on the other hand, hoped their actions would officially bring Russia into the conflict.²⁰

In April 2014 President Putin publicly endorsed the idea of '*Novorossiya*' (New Russia), targeting the whole of eastern and southern Ukraine for take-over, but he backed away from the idea shortly afterwards, following failed

¹⁶ Bellingcat, 'Bellingcat report: origin of artillery attacks on Ukrainian military positions in eastern Ukraine between 14 July 2014 and 8 August 2014', 17 Feb. 2015; and Mitrokhin, N., 'Infiltration, instruction, invasion: Russia's war in the Donbass', *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Apr. 2015), pp. 219–50.

¹⁷ See the archive at <www.bellingcat.com/tag/mh17/>; Koshiw, Y., *MH17: The Story of the Shooting Down of the Malaysian Airliner*, CreateSpace, 2015; and Bellingcat, 'MH17: Potential suspects and witnesses from the 53rd Anti-aircraft Missile Brigade', 23 Feb. 2016.

¹⁸ BBC News, 'Ukraine conflict: Fierce battle for town of Ilovaisk', 20 Aug. 2014; and Kramer, G. E. and Gordon, M. R., 'US faults Russia as combat spikes in east Ukraine', *New York Times*, 13 Feb. 2015. See also Sutyagin, I., 'Russian Troops in Ukraine', Royal United Services Institute, Briefing Paper (Mar. 2015).

¹⁹ [The Russian Federation prepared an invasion of Ukraine in 2014: Pashyns'kyi], *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, 2 Feb. 2016 (in Ukrainian).

²⁰ See the interview with Girkin-Strelkov at Nejromir-TV, YouTube, 22 Jan. 2015, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=G04tXnvKx8Y> (in Russian).

uprisings in Kharkiv and Odesa.²¹ Subsequently, the Donbas rebels began eulogizing the short-lived 1918 Donetsk Kryvyi-Rih Republic, which had (or claimed) expansive borders much larger than the areas the rebels controlled as of the end of 2015.²² Thus, neither Putin nor the rebels have defined the territory they ultimately wish to control. If Russia was exploiting the conflict in the east to destabilize the government in Kyiv, however, a strategy predicated on never allowing the putative borders or the political status of the rebel republics to be properly defined serves that purpose well.

While both Russia and the separatists were unwilling to define their territorial aims, divisions were apparent between them and within the ranks of the separatists.²³ The rebels needed more territory and preferred to time their offensives for domestic advantage rather than in line with Russian diplomacy. Overall, however, while Kremlin ‘curators’ such as Vladislav Surkov held the upper hand, this built up future problems in so far as it left some rebel leaders frustrated.²⁴

The multiple dimensions of intervention

The military balance between Russia and the rebels

The decisive battle at Ilovaisk in August 2014 was only the final stage in the process of escalating Russia’s commitment. One source estimates that by mid-August, prior to the battle, there were 20 000–25 000 troops fighting in the Donbas and only 40–45 per cent of them were ‘locals’.²⁵ The composition of the rebels was in constant flux, and exact proportions are hard to identify. According to one analysis, the Russian military rarely operated entire units in the Donbas region; they either provided command and control or were deliberately mixed—Russian troops were appropriated from different army bases and then mixed in with local Donbas fighters in order to disguise their origins.²⁶ There was also official logistical support for ‘non-state fighters’ from Russia.²⁷ Chechens fought on behalf of both the rebels and Ukraine, although the ‘Death Battalion’ on the rebel side was the larger unit, with an

²¹ See Putin’s comments during his annual phone-in on 17 Apr. 2014. President of Russia, ‘Direct line with Vladimir Putin’, Moscow, 17 Apr. 2014.

²² DNR Online, [In Donetsk there was a meeting in honour of the Donetsk-Krivoy-Rog Republic], 12 Feb. 2015 (in Russian).

²³ International Crisis Group, *Eastern Ukraine: a Dangerous Winter*, Europe Report no. 235, 18 Dec. 2014; and MacDonald, E. and Trach, N., “‘Power struggle’ in Donetsk prompts flurry of speculation in Kyiv and beyond”, *Kyiv Post*, 5 Sep. 2015.

²⁴ Dergachev, V., [Who influences the fate of Novorossiya: How Moscow works with the DNR and LNR], *Gazeta.ru*, 28 Jan. 2015 (in Russian).

²⁵ Mitrokhin, N., ‘Infiltration, instruction, invasion: Russia’s war in the Donbass’, *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Apr. 2015), pp. 238–39.

²⁶ Sutyagin (note 18), p. 4.

²⁷ Crowley, S., ‘(Not) Behind Enemy Lines 1: Recruiting for Russia’s War in Ukraine’, *Leksika*, 25 June 2015.

estimated 300 fighters.²⁸ Similarly, fighters from all over Europe supported both sides, but the International Brigade Pyatnashka on the rebel side was bigger.²⁹

The nature of the forces opposed to Kyiv also changed over time. They became more professional and financial reward became a key factor in recruitment. The total number of volunteers from Russia was in the hundreds at least.³⁰ However, a posthumously completed report by the Russian liberal politician, Boris Nemtsov, questioned whether the Russians who had served in the Donbas at one time or another were ‘volunteers or mercenaries’, as it claimed that monthly pay in the early stages of the fighting, before later inflation, was 60 000 to 90 000 roubles (\$900–1400).³¹

The initial protestors, militants and eventual fighters were dominated by a range of Russian nationalists, ‘including Cossacks, paratroopers (*desantniki*), Orthodox activists, neo-Nazi-neo-pagans, and supporters of neo-fascist publicist Alexander Dugin. In March–April 2014, these ideologically motivated “separatists”, to use the Ukrainian terminology, were pushed out of the political arena by the “militia” (the favoured Russian term being *opolchentsy*)’.³² Their numbers were swelled by local disaffected youth (so-called *gopniki*) and lower-tier officials, but also by defectors from the local security services.

Western support

Western support did not substantially predate or cause the onset of the conflict. The USA, the EU and Canada imposed the first round of sanctions against Russia in March 2014 the day after the Crimean referendum, but the more serious rounds of sanctions from a wider group of Western powers came after the MH17 tragedy in July 2014.³³ Concrete Western assistance for Ukraine was slow to materialize and was not a significant factor until 2015. The Western-allied Ukrainian authorities placed most of their hope in the USA, but the desire of the US Congress to make easy posturing points against Russia was opposed by US President Barack Obama who did not want to squander the peace dividend from his first term. After a series of similar bills, Congress passed the Ukraine Freedom Support Act in December 2014,

²⁸ Waller, N., ‘A Chechen war by proxy’, *Foreign Affairs*, 1 Apr. 2015.

²⁹ Jackson, P., ‘Ukraine war pulls in foreign fighters’, BBC News, 1 Sep. 2014; see also the Ukrainian ‘stop terror’ website and the page on the International Brigade ‘Fifteen’, <<https://stopterror.in.ua/info/2015/11/internationalnaya-brigada-pyatnashka/>>.

³⁰ Yudina, N., ‘Ul’trapravye strasti po Ukraine’ [Far right passions in Ukraine], SOVA Centre, 15 Sep. 2014 (in Russian).

³¹ Nemtsov, B., *Putin War: An Independent Expert Report* (Free Russia Foundation: Washington, DC, May 2015), pp. 24–31.

³² Mitrokhin (note 25), p. 221; see also Shekhovtsov, A., ‘How Alexander Dugin’s neo-Eurasianists geared up for the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2005–2013’, Euromaidan Press, 26 Jan. 2016.

³³ BBC News, ‘How far do EU–US sanctions on Russia go?’, 15 Sep. 2014.

which stipulated \$100 million in military and security assistance but left its disbursement to the discretion of the president. The US House of Representatives voted 348 to 48 in March 2015 to provide lethal aid and the US 2015 defense bill eventually included \$50 million to that end, but Obama was not forced to act. The USA has previously delivered more than \$260 million worth of non-lethal aid to Ukraine, but the actual provisions were of dubious quality and reportedly included aged Humvees and bullet-proof vests.³⁴

In addition, US forces were involved in the Ukraine-based exercises Fearless Guardian and Rapid Trident in 2014 and 2015 respectively.³⁵ Russia complained that US participation in the exercises was in violation of article 10 of the second Minsk Agreement, which provided for the ‘withdrawal of all foreign units . . . from Ukrainian territory’, and ‘does not say that this provision applies exclusively to [Ukraine’s] eastern provinces’.³⁶ On 14 September 2015, Canada officially launched its training mission Operation Unifier with the deployment of approximately 200 army personnel to Ukraine until March 2017.³⁷ Ukrainian claims in 2015 that ‘more than ten countries of Europe’ had supplied it with arms were not substantiated.³⁸ The United Kingdom had a £6 million (\$8.6 million) programme to help with military training, but this takes place well away from the conflict zone.³⁹ Beginning in March 2015 with 75 British personnel, 2 000 Ukrainians were expected to have undergone the programme by the end of the year. Some second-hand items were supplied by the British Government, such as first aid supplies and ‘night-vision goggles, helmets, GPS units and “ruggedised” laptops’ but no lethal weapons.⁴⁰

From the first Minsk Agreement to Debaltseve

The overwhelming commitment of regular Russian forces to eastern Ukraine in August 2014 stemmed the advance of the Ukrainian Army and volunteer forces, which had grown increasingly effective during the previous months.⁴¹ According to Ukrainian sources, the Russian-led operation

³⁴ Gibbons-Neff, T., ‘On Ukraine’s front lines, US-supplied equipment is falling apart’, *Washington Post*, 30 Nov. 2015.

³⁵ Skripnichuk, A., ‘Exercise Fearless Guardian begins third rotation’, United States Army, 16 Sep. 2015; and United States Army Europe, ‘Exercise Rapid Trident’, [n.d.], <<http://www.eur.army.mil/RapidTrident/>>.

³⁶ TASS, ‘Moscow warns against US plans to continue training Ukrainian troopers’, 26 Nov. 2015.

³⁷ See the official webpage at <www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad/op-unifier.page>.

³⁸ Interview with Valeriy Chaly, Ukrainian ambassador to the USA. *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, [Ukraine is receiving arms from more than ten countries of Europe], 10 July 2015 (in Ukrainian).

³⁹ ‘Britain to step up training of Ukrainian armed forces’, Reuters, 24 June 2015.

⁴⁰ BBC News, ‘UK to send 3500 first aid kits to Ukrainian Armed Forces’, 16 Jan. 2015; and BBC News, ‘Ukraine crisis: UK Government supplies military equipment’, 6 Mar. 2016.

⁴¹ For the official analysis of events at Ilovaisk by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence see <www.mil.gov.ua/news/2015/10/19/analiz-ilovausk--14354/>, 19 Oct. 2015.

at Ilovaik led to 366 Ukrainian killed and 249 wounded.⁴² Ukraine sued for peace and accepted the first Minsk Agreement, which was signed on 5 September 2014. For the price of a nominal ceasefire, Ukraine partially acquiesced to the *de facto* existence of the two rebel ‘republics’: the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR). The Government reluctantly dealt with their respective representatives and made key concessions in domestic law. On 16 September the Ukrainian Parliament passed the law on the ‘Temporary status of local self-government in certain areas of the Donetsk and the Luhansk regions (Law on Special Status)’, although its provisions would only apply for three years, and the law on the ‘Exemption from criminal and administrative responsibility for the events in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions’.⁴³

Within weeks of the signing the Minsk Agreement, the weakness of Ukrainian Government’s position was further demonstrated as the separatist republics continued to push to regain lost ground, fierce fighting erupted around Donetsk airport and, by December 2014, 1000 more Ukrainian soldiers had died.⁴⁴ The Ukrainians were forced to withdraw in January 2015.

The Minsk Agreement provided for elections to be held under Ukrainian law, and the government was organizing them to be held on 7 December. In the meantime, the rebel authorities unilaterally held their own ‘elections’ on 2 November, a process which had nothing to do with the Minsk Agreement—the only ‘parties’ standing were fronts for the local militias. The real purpose of the vote was to confirm the ascendancy of Russia’s preferred fighters, Alexander Zakharchenko for the DNR and Igor Plotnitsky for the LNR. Both men had been manoeuvred into their positions by Russia in August in order to give the DNR and LNR more ‘local leadership’. This provided cover for what was, in fact, a Russian invasion using conventional forces. The November elections were duly followed by a crackdown on rival militias: Alexander Bednov, head of the ‘Batman’ unit in Luhansk, was killed by men loyal to Plotnitsky on 1 January 2015.⁴⁵

The rebel elections confirmed the breakdown of the first Minsk Agreement. The Ukrainian Government reacted by financially isolating both the DNR and the LNR, despite the humanitarian consequences and the *de jure* argument that the region was still part of Ukraine, although economic ties had already been severely disrupted. In November 2014, presidential decrees suspended the functioning of all state institutions and enterprises operating in rebel territory and the financing of pensions and other social payments

⁴² UNIAN, ‘Ukraine publishes list of KIAs in Ilovaik tragedy’, 20 Aug. 2015.

⁴³ Odessatalk.com, ‘Status of the Donbas: Presidential Bill’, 17 Sep. 2014; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, ‘Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the laws’, Press release, 17 Sep. 2014.

⁴⁴ Keane, F., ‘Ukraine, Russia and the ceasefire that never was’, BBC News, 2 Dec. 2014.

⁴⁵ International Crisis Group, ‘Russia and the separatists in Eastern Ukraine’, Europe and Central Asia Briefing, no. 79, 5 Feb. 2016.

sourced from the state budget. In December and January, travel in and out of the DNR and the LNR was made more difficult.

Russia built up troop levels and 10 000 Russian troops were reported to be in the occupied areas by the end of 2014.⁴⁶ Other sources claimed that in January 2015 there were '20 000 more [troops] . . . concentrated on the border with Ukraine and engaged in provisioning, rotation, and overall support'. According to the same source: 'attacks are conducted by infantry and armored vehicles of the Russian mercenaries by about 60 per cent, and 40 per cent are local betrayers', the latter meaning the forces of the DNR and the LNR.⁴⁷

In mid-January the fighting gained renewed intensity. First there was an unsuccessful push by the rebels towards the key port of Mariupol and then intense fighting around Debaltseve, a strategically located city north-east of Donetsk city that connects the DNR and the LNR by rail and road junctions.⁴⁸

The agreement failed to stop the fighting, as the rebels pressed the advantage gained by the Russian build-up. As in August 2014 at Ilovaisk, a massive Russian combined-forces operation in Debaltseve in February 2015 was reportedly led by a senior Russian general, Lieutenant-General Alexander Lentsov, the deputy commander of Russian Ground Forces.⁴⁹

According to official Ukrainian sources, the Ukrainian death toll in and around Debaltseve in January and February 2015 was 224.⁵⁰ This second Ukrainian 'defeat' was not without costs to Russia, however, as the amount of territory taken was relatively small and according to one source: 'the losses among the Russian irregular army in the past month and a half, even in such a tactically advantageous situation, have been so great (no fewer than 1000 men) that few will want to volunteer for the next offensive'.⁵¹

The renewed military pressure on Ukraine, international awareness that the Minsk Agreement had failed to stop the fighting and the increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to one million in February,

⁴⁶ Sutyagin (note 18).

⁴⁷ Censor.net, 'Putin's strategy and Russia's January offensive in Donbas: analysis of the operational situation at the front line', 28 Jan. 2015.

⁴⁸ Socor, V., 'Russian forces target three key objects in Ukraine's east', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 10 Oct. 2014.

⁴⁹ McDermott, R., 'Russia's role in the fall of Debaltseve', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 24 Feb. 2015.

⁵⁰ Quinn, A., 'Rebels, Kiev offer starkly different Debaltseve death tolls', *Moscow Times*, 19 Feb. 2015. According to the military blogger Yuriy Butusov there were 159 dead, 118 wounded and 36 missing, see see Yuriy Butusov, [Loss of Ukrainian soldiers in the Battle of Debaltsevskoy Arc 24 January–18 December 2015], Facebook, 20 Feb. 2016, <www.facebook.com/butusov.yuriy/posts/932422693464694>, (in Russian).

⁵¹ Mitrokhin, N., [The output from the boiler], grani.ru, 18 Feb. 2015 (in Russian).

plus a further 600 000 displaced abroad, led to a second Minsk Agreement on 12 February 2015.⁵²

The second Minsk Agreement and beyond

The Ukrainian side criticized Western negotiators, led by Germany, for failing to insist that Russia should be an equal party to the second Minsk Agreement, which led to an unequal stress on Ukraine's 'obligations'.⁵³ Some Russian critics argued that the first Minsk Agreement did not go far enough in securing recognition for the separatists.⁵⁴ Moreover, the timing and sequencing of the new agreement's 13 articles were ambiguous, and so were subject to unilateral interpretation. Ukraine argued that stabilization of the security situation should come first and called for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons from a graduated 'security zone' monitored by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and an amnesty and prisoner exchange. Russia and the rebel leaders pressed for political reforms—particularly constitutional change—that would entrench the legitimacy of the DNR-LNR and for 'the full restoration of social and economic connections'.⁵⁵

The second Minsk Agreement ignored the rebels' November elections and article 12 proposed alternative elections under Ukrainian law and OSCE supervision. Ukraine, however, felt that the whole process was almost designed to fail.⁵⁶ Crucially, the process would never get as far as article 9, which called for the 'restoration of full control over the state border of Ukraine by Ukraine's government throughout the whole conflict area', or article 10 on the 'pullout of all foreign armed formations, military equipment, and also mercenaries from the territory of Ukraine under OSCE supervision. The disarmament of all illegal groups'.⁵⁷ Footnotes to the agreement sketched out constitutional changes, not necessarily the same as in the September 2014 'Special status' law, that would give the rebel authorities 'language self-determination', independent appointment of prosecutors (the key legal officials in Ukraine) and 'freedom to create people's militias'.

⁵² UNHCR, 'Ukraine internal displacement nears 1 million as fighting escalates in Donetsk region', News stories, 6 Feb. 2015.

⁵³ Haran, O. and Burkovsky, P., 'From "hybrid war" to "hybrid peace": one more "frozen conflict"?', PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo no. 369 (July 2015).

⁵⁴ [Round table 'The Minsk process through the eyes of the Donbass'], *Tsentr politicheskogoanaliza*, 6 July 2015 (in Russian).

⁵⁵ 'Minsk Agreement on Ukraine crisis—text in full', *Daily Telegraph*, 12 Feb. 2015.

⁵⁶ Radio svoboda 'Interview with Oleksii Haran', 13 Jan. 2016.

⁵⁷ 'Full text of the Minsk Agreement' (note 55).

After the second Minsk Agreement

Despite the Ukraine's defeat at Debaltseve, Ukrainian forces were now in strong defensive positions. Including reserves and logistical apparatus, the force level of Ukraine reached around 60 000 personnel in the summer of 2015.⁵⁸ Non-governmental organizations and religious groups helped with practical support, including evacuation of the wounded.⁵⁹ The poor performance of the regular army in the spring of 2014 had radically improved. Western training may have helped, but the key learning process was at the sharp end of lived experience, with soldiers adapting to their limited equipment and the deadly threats provided by the separatists' superior firepower.⁶⁰

However, the key difference was the fighting spirit of the numerous volunteer militias, which had largely been integrated into and subordinated to Ukrainian Defence or Interior Ministry structures. In April 2015, many volunteers were incorporated into the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, especially those from civil society logistical and medical service organizations, such as 'Help the Army of Ukraine'. They were now arguably the driving force within a previously corrupt and hopelessly inefficient ministry, which had also been thoroughly penetrated by Russian agents since 2010.⁶¹ Many individual volunteer commanders also transferred to the regular army.

Nonetheless, several units continued to act independently, some because of the prestige of their performance in the field, some because their leaders distrusted the regular army leadership and some because they still served the interests of the oligarchs who financed them. For example, two armed battalions of the Right Sector—a right-wing Ukrainian nationalist party disparaged by Russian propaganda, but that won only 1.8 per cent of the vote in the October 2014 Ukrainian elections—remained independent of the state.⁶² The Right Sector, which is allegedly prominent in the arms trade, was particularly hard to deal with because of the strength of its parallel political organization.⁶³ Members of 'Sich', another militia that remained unsubsidiarized to the state, were held responsible for the violent protests outside

⁵⁸ Notably, conscription, abolished in 2008, had been brought back in May 2014. Much of the information on troop levels and movements comes from Gustav Gressel, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

⁵⁹ 'Verified ways to help the Ukrainian army', *Euromaidan Press*, 4 July 2014.

⁶⁰ Karber, P., 'Lessons learned from the Russo-Ukrainian war', Potomac Foundation, unpublished paper.

⁶¹ Galeotti, M., 'Russia's spy game: why Russia is winning the intelligence war in Ukraine', *Foreign Affairs*, 30 Oct. 2014.

⁶² See the section on Right Sector on the website 'Anti-Maidan', [n.d.], <http://antimaydan.info/pravyj_sektor.html>; and Sukhov, O., 'War, weapons mix for deadly politics', *Kyiv Post*, 4 Sep. 2015.

⁶³ Romanyuk, R. and Musayeva-Borovyk, S., [The Mukachevo triangle: smuggling, right sector and sworn friends], *Ukrains'ka pravda*, 13 July 2015 (in Russian).

the Ukrainian Parliament on 31 August that left three dead.⁶⁴ The Azov battalion—founded by the party ‘Patriots of Ukraine’, which uses neo-fascist symbols—was supposedly more disciplined.⁶⁵ The Azov were one of many volunteer units that were accused of serving the economic interests of oligarchs or criminal groups.⁶⁶

Fighting flared again in late May to early June and in August 2015. A new Russian-backed offensive was rumoured and even expected. Ukraine’s greatest fear was an attempt to seize the crucial port city of Mariupol. In May, Ukrainian drones filmed Russian military training camps directly inside the DNR and LNR, rather than over the border as they had been previously.⁶⁷ However, the many skirmishes of the period served mainly as probing operations, usually left to local forces, and confirmed Ukraine’s capacity to resist. Rebel forces suffered major losses at the short but intense battle of Marinka on 3 June.⁶⁸

Protracted conflict as the ‘new normal’ in the Donbas

‘Normalization’ in the DNR–LNR

While Russia instigated the significant changes in the leadership of the rebel republics after the summer of 2015, the changes indicated a continuing conflict of interest. Russia had gone cold on the broader *Novorossiya* project and, to compensate for plummeting oil prices, wanted an amelioration of sanctions. The DNR–LNR leaders, however, had reasons for preferring to continue to fight: they had only a fraction of the territory they wanted, none were really professional politicians or businessmen so they had nothing else to do and it helped to maximize their income (see below). Russia, therefore, began to struggle to get the rebel republics to do its bidding, and leadership purges were cyclical.

The local oligarchs also progressively restored their influence in the rebel republics, even if they were not as dominant in the economic and political life of the Donbas as they had been before 2014. They were useful to Russia, if they could tame the warring militias locally and help prevent national political reforms, but they were also useful to Ukraine as a potential lesser-evil alternative to the original separatist leaders.

⁶⁴ Shekhvostov, A., ‘The three pins of a murderous grenade by the Rada’, Personal blog, 12 Sep. 2015.

⁶⁵ UA Inside Info, [Which battalions exist in Ukraine?], 1 Sep. 2014 (in Ukrainian).

⁶⁶ The Azov was linked to Thor Kolomoisky, a Dnipropetrovsk billionaire and leading oligarch in the front-line region.

⁶⁷ Gressel, G., ‘The Minsk Agreement: the military aspects’, European Council on Foreign Relations, Nov. 2015.

⁶⁸ OSCE Ukraine, ‘Spot report by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM), 3 June 2015: Fighting around Marinka’, Kiev, 4 June 2015.

On 4 September 2015 one of the remaining *Novorossiya* ideologues, Andrey Purgin, was replaced by Denis Pushilin, who is alleged to be closer to the old oligarchs, as head of the DNR ‘parliament’. There were also further purges of militia leaders who were too independently minded. Some were murdered, some forced back to Russia.⁶⁹ Rival militia leaders Pavel Dryomov, Aleksey Mozgovoy and Aleksey Bednov were assassinated, while populist ‘anti-oligarch’ leaders were also removed.⁷⁰

The economic life of the Donbas remained ruinous, but was now regularized. An estimated 70 per cent of local expenditure was funded by Russia, allowing regular pensions and other payments to be met from the spring of 2015.⁷¹ Nonetheless, rebel leaders increasingly took control of the local economy, and of Russian aid, for their own purposes. Alexander Khodakovsky and the Vostok militia controlled smuggling and the militia was increasingly used to protect oligarchs’ interests. The DNR’s Alexander Zakharchenko ran the ‘parallel’ petrol filling stations and food supply through the companies ATB Market/First Republic and Amstor.⁷² Criminalization, therefore, went hand-in-hand with the creeping ‘re-oligarchization’ of the region.⁷³

Moving forwards despite uncertainty

The Ukrainian Parliament passed constitutional reform bill with a majority of 265 votes on 31 August, prompting protests that left three policemen dead. The wording talked only vaguely of a ‘special manner of operation for the local governments in some counties of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts’ but did not address the details discussed in the second Minsk Agreement ‘footnote’. Since a constitutional majority requires 300 votes, a second vote will be required in a later session of parliament. It was not possible to hold the vote before the deadline of the end of 2015 as the Ukrainian Government was showing increasing signs of disunity on the bill and other domestic reform issues. The Minsk deadline was therefore effectively fudged. The ceasefire agreed on 1 September 2015 was at least partially observed. Hostilities were largely confined to sniping and artillery exchanges. In the longer term, however, the Donbas seems to be headed towards a protracted, if not a ‘frozen’,

⁶⁹ Euromaidan Press, ‘Kremlin adopts new Donbas strategy: autonomy within Ukraine’, 8 Dec. 2014.

⁷⁰ Åslund, A., ‘New Russian management of the Donbas signifies Putin may be ready to negotiate’, Atlantic Council, 4 Jan. 2016; and Fitzpatrick, C. A., ‘Who killed Prizrak commander Aleksei Mozgovoy?’, *The Interpreter*, 25 May 2015.

⁷¹ Liga.novosti, [Terrorist Khodakovskii: Russia supports and leads us], 10 Sep. 2015 (in Russian); and Röpcke, V. J. ‘How Russia finances the Ukrainian rebel territories’, *Bild*, 16 Jan. 2106.

⁷² Kravchenko, V., ‘Political groups in “DPR”’: reintegrators vs republicans’, *Labyrinths of War*, 28 Nov. 2015.

⁷³ Presa Ukraïny, [The clans of Yefremov and Akhmetov are returning to the Donbas, Sniehyr’iov], 5 Oct. 2015 (in Ukrainian).

conflict. Relative peace went hand-in-hand with some limited political progress.

A potential pitfall was avoided on 2 October when in a Normandy Format Meeting (Russia and Ukraine alongside Germany and France), Russia agreed to help dissuade the DNR and the LNR from yet another attempt to hold their own elections outside of the process outlined in the second Minsk Agreement. Many other stumbling blocks remain, however, to the full implementation of the political parts of the agreement. Would IDPs be allowed to vote in elections? Would Ukrainian parties be able to stand? Would Russian passport holders remain in the leadership of the DNR and the LNR, exempt from normal residency and citizenship requirements?

The agreed general amnesty and release of all prisoners is another stumbling block—there were reportedly 131 Ukrainians still being detained by the rebels as of the end of 2015 and many more are ‘missing in action’.⁷⁴ Both sides put captured fighters on trial. On the Ukrainian side, allegations of torture and arbitrary executions, plus the shooting down of MH17, mean that a blanket amnesty would be opposed by many, including nationalists, veterans and human rights activists.

Nonetheless, by the end of 2015 Ukrainian force levels at the front had been halved to around 30 000 personnel, with the remainder moved back for retraining. Front-line duties were generally transferred to light infantry divisions, while more heavily armed and mobile forces were kept in reserve to comply with the ceasefire agreements. Most regular Russian forces were withdrawn to the Russian city of Rostov-on-Donor or other areas near Ukraine’s international border.⁷⁵ The remaining Russian presence in the Donbas was estimated by one observer to be at least two heavy brigades of 4500 personnel each plus several paratrooper and special operations battalions.⁷⁶ In November and December 2015, Russian forces were still observed at the front in areas managed by local troops that were seen as unreliable or ineffective by the Kremlin. The number of Russian troops in the Donbas was around 15 000, with 20 000 in close reserve, compared to about 7000–15 000 serving in ‘local’ rebel forces.

Russia’s switch to Syria: hiatus or coda?

This is not the place to examine in detail Russia’s motives for its Syrian intervention, but at least three were clearly related to Ukraine: distracting attention from the war in the Donbas; hoping to set up some kind of grand

⁷⁴ UNIAN Information Agency, ‘SBU: 131 Ukrainians held captive by Russian proxies’, 11 Dec. 2015.

⁷⁵ Svetkova, M., ‘Exclusive: Russia masses heavy firepower on border with Ukraine, witness’, Reuters, 27 May 2015; and ‘One base to rule them all: five facts you should know about Russia’s main invasion hub’, *Conflict Report*, 8 Jan. 2015.

⁷⁶ I am again grateful to Gustav Gressel (note 58) for information in this section.

bargain with the West; and bringing about some amelioration of the sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014.⁷⁷ By the second half of 2015, the war in the Donbas was bogged down, and the Russian economy was suffering as the fall in the oil price multiplied the effect of sanctions. Significantly, the beginning of the Russian Syrian operation in late September 2015 was swiftly followed by the appointment of long-term Putin confidante Boris Gryzlov as chief negotiator for the Minsk Process, seemingly indicating a willingness to compromise, and by the first meaningful ceasefire.

The domestic story in the Russian media duly shifted overnight from Ukraine to Syria. There were some further troop withdrawals from the Donbas, particularly the redeployment of special operations forces.⁷⁸ Attention in the West also shifted, at least in the short term, particularly after the terrorist attacks by Islamist militants in Paris in November 2015. There were calls in Germany and in other parts of Europe for cooperation with Russia over the Middle East and even the refugee crisis.⁷⁹ The relative unity achieved within the EU, and between the EU and USA, after the tragedy of MH17 was wearing off by the start of 2016, as Italy led attempts by southern EU states preoccupied with their own problems to soften sanctions. On the other hand, there were periodic small increases in the fighting in the Donbas in the last quarter of 2015, to remind Kyiv that the conflict was not definitively over.

The Minsk Agreement also seemed to be unravelling as domestic problems built up in Ukraine at the end of 2015. Implementing the Minsk Agreement in full—in particular ceding control of the international border back to Ukraine—might cause the DNR and the LNR to collapse. The Ukrainian authorities were increasingly squeezed between factions that did not want to fully reintegrate the rebel republics on Russia's terms and nationalists fundamentally opposed to the constitutional concessions in the Minsk Agreement. Neither Ukraine, nor Russia or the rebel republics had got what they wanted. Finding a solution in the middle ground will be immensely difficult, and probably guarantee continued Russian involvement for years to come.

⁷⁷ On the Russian intervention in Syria see also section II in this chapter.

⁷⁸ *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, [Fighters in 'panic' because of transfers of Russian forces from the Donbass to Syria-IS], 22 Sep. 2015 (in Russian).

⁷⁹ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Politik*, 'Schäuble will zusammen mit Russland Flüchtlingskrise lösen' [Schäuble wants to solve the refugee crisis with Russia], 24 Jan. 2016.