

The Ukraine Crisis: Risks of Renewed Military Conflict after Minsk II

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I. Overview

A second agreement in Minsk on 12 February produced a ceasefire that for now is mostly holding and measures to de-escalate the conflict. Many officials locally and in Kyiv, Moscow and the West, nevertheless, believe war could resume in Ukraine's east within weeks. If it does, much will depend on the quality of top commanders on both sides. Ukraine's army is enmeshed in a command crisis the country's leaders seem unwilling to admit or address. For the separatist rebels, the command and control Moscow provides could give them the advantage in any new fighting. Meanwhile, President Petro Poroshenko faces criticism from his Western allies about the slow pace of reform, opposition from the political establishment as he tries to pass legislation required by the Minsk agreement and a steady stream of complaints from Donetsk and Moscow that the measures do not go far enough.

This briefing focuses on the negotiations leading to that agreement, the military balance and appetites for further confrontation on all sides, as well as likely scenarios for the immediate future. Crisis Group's analysis of and policy recommendations on the strategic questions the crisis poses for European stability can be found in a simultaneously published statement.

The most recent separatist offensive began around 18 January and petered out within a month. It was bloody and destructive but demonstrated little more than that neither side has a decisive battlefield advantage. The post-ceasefire defeat of the Ukrainian army in Debaltseve, a railway hub that is strategic because it links the separatist Donetsk and Luhansk territories in the Donbas region, was a traumatic political and military blow to Poroshenko. However, while it allowed the separatists to claim victory, they suffered heavy casualties and did not achieve their stated objectives, notably the seizure of the whole of Donetsk oblast.

The offensive further exposed the deepening malaise within the Ukrainian armed forces, whose incompetent, sometimes corrupt senior commanders are incapable of designing effective combat operations or unwilling to lead them, leaving junior officers on their own, under serious pressure. Mid-level professional officers are speaking openly against their high command, and the government is not responding. Reports from both sides of the battlefield make clear that the Ukrainian forces are determined but lack competent leadership.

Russian training of the separatist forces is bearing fruit. These forces have many problems, particularly a much smaller recruitment pool than Kyiv, a serious lack of experienced commanders and deep factional divisions within their political and military leadership that sometimes explode into violence. Organised crime creates difficulties, and some units still operate semi-autonomously. The state they are fighting for has few political or administrative structures, no money and no economy. Nevertheless, they are moving steadily – with substantial, probably growing, Russian command input – toward creation of a functional army.

The main change Minsk II effected is a ceasefire that has sharply reduced casualties. Both sides claim to have pulled back heavy weapons, as it prescribes; they accuse each other, however, of returning the weapons once observers have left. Most other points of the agreement are also in dispute. The Russians' successful insistence during the negotiation to retain part of the border with Ukraine in effect under their control indicates they are keeping their military options open.

An early separatist offensive – for example to extend control to the whole of Donetsk oblast – cannot succeed without Russian military aid, advice and, probably, once again substantial numbers of regular Russian troops. Moscow will have to decide whether it wants to commit to this at the risk of more U.S. and EU sanctions. This is problematic for a country looking at 20 per cent inflation, a possible banking crisis and unprecedented capital flight.

Research for this briefing was undertaken in Kyiv and Brussels; it builds on prior reporting on eastern Ukraine and Ukraine's domestic political situation.

II. Minsk II¹

A second round of talks in the Belarussian capital of Minsk was in part an attempt by the EU and its allies to resuscitate the predecessor agreement negotiated in September 2014, in the wake of a crushing Ukrainian military defeat at Ilovaik.² That agreement quickly foundered under violations by both sides and a major Russian build-up of military assistance.

Two groups met in Minsk on 11-12 February, nearly four weeks in to the separatists' offensive.³ A trilateral contact group, comprising representatives of Russia and Ukraine and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), discussed concrete measures for settling the conflict with leaders of the self-proclaimed People's

¹ For earlier reporting, see Crisis Group Europe Reports N°235, *Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter*, 18 December 2014; and N°231, *Ukraine: Running out of Time*, 14 May 2014.

² The original of the September 2014 Minsk protocol is in Russian, see www.osce.org/home/123806. For an English version, see <http://mfa.gov.ua/en/news-feeds/foreign-offices-news/27596-protocol-on-the-results-of-consultations-of-the-trilateral-contact-group-minsk-05092014>. For more on Ilovaik and the September agreement, see Crisis Group Report, *Eastern Ukraine*, op. cit.

³ A wide variety of forces are labelled "separatists". In this briefing the term is used as shorthand for the organised political and military structures of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DNR and LNR). Leaders of these groups have frequently and unambiguously stressed that they see their future separate from Ukraine – either as part of Russia or as an independent state. See, for example, the statement by DNR "President" Alexander Zakharchenko, fn. 50 below. Other political activists to whom the term is also frequently applied currently support the DNR or LNR but may be privately inclined, for political or economic reasons, to accept a broad form of decentralisation within a restructured Ukraine.

Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.⁴ Separately, French President Francois Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's President Poroshenko consulted – at times contentiously and for some sixteen hours – under the auspices of the so-called Normandy framework. Almost half that time, the Russian media reported and senior diplomats confirmed, was devoted to the threat hanging over the Ukrainian garrison in the strategic town of Debaltseve.⁵ Poroshenko is said to have insisted the troops could hold out. Putin reportedly disagreed.⁶ The discussion ended inconclusively, and Debaltseve was not mentioned in the final documents.

A number of diplomatic sources characterised Minsk II as a holding action by European leaders who were anxious to forestall any U.S. decision to provide weapons to Ukraine and also to prevent a collapse of the EU consensus on sanctions. One diplomat noted that President Putin seemed well aware of the Europeans' dilemmas, was "relaxed" throughout the deliberations and took full advantage of their discomfort. The result, he said, was "a quite awful" document, "much worse" than its predecessor, leaving Kyiv in a considerably weakened position.⁷

The contact group members and separatist leaders signed a complex Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements.⁸ The four government leaders, meeting under the Normandy format, issued a declaration of support for the Package, though their document, President Putin carefully noted, was not signed.⁹ Central to the agreed measures was a ceasefire, which was to be followed by a pull-back of heavy weapons and serve as the prelude to lengthy political consultations. Most of the remaining key proposals were attractive to one side, anathema to the other.

A call for elections in the rebel areas "in accordance with Ukrainian legislation" that appeared to be a major Russian concession, for example, would have allowed Ukrainian law to help determine the future of the LNR and DNR. This unnerved the separatists. Because of this provision, the DNR and LNR representatives refused to

⁴ For simplicity the self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk will be referred to largely by their Russian acronyms, DNR and LNR. They are self-declared entities, not recognised by any state, including Russia. Moscow stresses that Kyiv's conflict with them is a domestic Ukrainian issue. The Trilateral Contact Group, representatives of Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, was formed in mid-2014. During key meetings – most notably September 2014 and February 2015 – senior representatives of the DNR and LNR also participated.

⁵ "Как четыре президента провели 16 часов в Минске" ["How Four Presidents spent 16 hours in Minsk"], *Kommersant*, 12 February 2015.

⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior diplomat, Kyiv, 17 March 2015; Ukrainian government official, Kyiv, 18 March 2015.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Western diplomat, Kyiv, 13 March 2015. The diplomat, like other commentators, singled out as particular flaws the continuing lack of control over the Russian-Ukrainian border and the failure to withdraw troops from the line of separation.

⁸ OSCE, an active participant in the talks, has a Russian text on its site. www.osce.org/ru/cio/140221?download=true. An unofficial English translation is at www.cfr.org/ukraine/package-measures-implementation-minsk-agreements/p36118.

⁹ Speaking to the press at the conclusion of the talks, Putin noted that "one document has just been signed: this was signed by the Minsk Contact Group, and is called 'Measures aimed at the implementation of the Minsk agreements'. A second document – unsigned – is a declaration by the President of France, the President of Ukraine, your humble servant, and the Chancellor of Federal Republic of Germany that we support this process". "Declaration to the press on the outcome of negotiations in the 'Normandy format'". Kremlin website, 12 February 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/news/47664>. For a text of the declaration, see <http://iveria.biz/print:page,1,1223-normandy-four-declaration-text-minsk-agreement-on-ukraine.html>.

sign the final document for several hours. A provision to withdraw all “foreign armed formations, military equipment and mercenaries” would seem to have applied particularly to Russia and so to signify de-escalation on the ground. Soon after the agreement was made public, however, Russia reiterated that it is not a party to the conflict, thus not bound to implement any part of the agreement.¹⁰ Some prisoners have been exchanged, but not on the agreement’s “all for all” basis.

Russia and the separatists gained several strategic advantages. The most significant was postponement of steps to place some 450km of the Ukrainian-Russian border currently controlled by separatists under Kyiv’s supervision. Kyiv is now to regain jurisdiction at the end of 2015, and only if it has made changes to the Ukrainian constitution. In the meantime, Russian military aid and troops can move de facto unhindered into the DNR and LNR.

Under the terms of the agreement, a pullback of heavy weaponry was to begin no later than the second day after the ceasefire and finish within fourteen days. On the first day after completion of the pullback, Ukraine and the separatists were to begin a dialogue on political issues, including local elections and the status of the separatist entities. The dialogue would also address practical issues, such as Kyiv’s resumption of pension payments to residents of the separatist areas, where civilians are living in conditions of great hardship. The pullback has not been accomplished, and none of the rest has occurred. Ukraine, whose economy remains in a precarious situation, would in any case have great difficulty finding the money for pensions. Meanwhile, movement between separatist and government areas remains closely controlled, by security troops and border guards on both sides.¹¹

Those at the negotiations noted again the presence and active participation of Vladislav Surkov, a Putin aide and political strategist. The separatists describe him as their political “supervisor” in Moscow, but he is roundly disliked by the hardliners among them and their Moscow supporters, who want no negotiation with Kyiv.¹² He is also widely believed to be the originator of the Novorossiya project – the plan to create a separate, pro-Russian state from the Russian border, along the Black Sea coast to Moldova.¹³ Meanwhile, both sides have announced plans to increase their armed forces: Ukraine to 250,000, the DNR and LNR to a combined total of 100,000.¹⁴ The two adversaries have very different recruitment pools: Kyiv probably controls

¹⁰ “We simply physically cannot do this, because Russia is not a participant in this conflict”, Dmitry Peskov, President Putin’s spokesman, declared. РИА Новости [Ria-novosti news agency], <http://ria.ru/world/20150213/1047476036.html#ixzz3SNAembqC>.

¹¹ For the full list of requirements for those wishing to move between the two zones, see: www.sbu.gov.ua/sbu/control/en/publish/article?art_id=136879&cat_id=35317.

¹² One of the most prominent hardliners, Igor Girkin-Strelkov, recently claimed that Surkov was “consciously sabotaging” Putin’s instructions regarding the war. Interview, Russian Spring website, 24 February 2015, <http://rusvesna.su/news/1424764180>.

¹³ Crisis Group Report, *Eastern Ukraine*, op. cit.

¹⁴ Ukrainian troop increase: www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ukraine/personnel.htm. Separatist troop increase: www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/02/us-ukraine-crisis-rebels-mobilisation-idUSKBNOL60R920150202. On paper at least, the current Ukrainian armed forces strength is about 230,000. Mobilisation has encountered a number of problems, including incompetence and evasion, officials admit. The military also has a serious problem with alcohol abuse. Crisis Group interviews, Ukrainian military observers, 18 March 2015; senior official, 19 March, both in Kyiv. There are no reliable figures, and few plausible guesses, as to the strength of the DNR and LNR forces.

about 39 to 40 million of Ukraine's population of 42.7 million. The separatist entities can draw from a population of about 3 million.¹⁵

III. The Separatist Offensive

Minsk II was overshadowed by the intense fighting for the railway hub of Debaltseve, an important link between DNR and LNR territories defended by several thousand Ukrainian troops. This was the final and decisive stage of the offensive. The Ukrainian withdrawal under fire on 18 February – three days after the ceasefire supposedly went into force – allowed the separatists to claim their offensive was a victory though, until then, its achievements were well below their stated objectives.

A. Planning

Preparations for the January offensive had been underway for months. After Russian regulars defeated the Ukrainian army in the Donetsk oblast town of Ilovaisk in late August 2014, Moscow ordered separatist militias not to advance into the abandoned areas, and DNR leaders expressed frustration with the Russian ban on offensive actions. Moscow's attitude seemed to change in late October, when it started moving into the DNR and LNR what separatist officials in Donetsk, as well as U.S. officials, described as an unprecedented amount of weapons and other military supplies.¹⁶ Some militia units also received several months of training in Russia.

The sharp jump in military aid coincided with the Ukrainian legislative elections and was described by some separatist officials as Moscow's response to the unexpectedly strong showing of the bloc headed by President Poroshenko's more hawkish prime minister, Arseny Yatsenyuk. In late December, a senior separatist leader confidently predicted an offensive in the spring, "or perhaps earlier", and spoke of possible uprisings in major south-eastern cities, including Kharkov and Odessa.¹⁷

B. Hostilities

On 23 January, five days after launching their offensive, separatist leaders announced their objectives: to capture all Donetsk oblast and push the Ukrainian heavy artillery just west of Donetsk city beyond range of the city centre. By the time European and Russian leaders reached Minsk, it was clear the offensive had fallen far short. The rebels had taken relatively small areas but met unexpectedly intense resistance. Efforts to capture forward positions near Donetsk city, notably strong points in the village of Piski and town of Avdiyika, were repulsed with heavy casualties. The offensive was also meant to test whether Russian training had converted the militias into

¹⁵ The separatists currently control about 35 per cent of Donetsk, including Donetsk city, which had a peacetime population of just under one million. The LNR has considerably less territory than the DNR. The two oblasts had a total peacetime population of 6.5 million. Over 1.4 million people have been displaced by the war, according to international organisations. Many others have left the separatist-controlled areas. Population figures are based on State Statistics Service www.ukrstat.gov.ua.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Donetsk, late November 2014; telephone interview, U.S. State Department official, 19 February 2015.

¹⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Eastern Ukraine*, op. cit.

a cohesive force. The results were mixed.¹⁸ Throughout the month, separatist media and officials – often more candid than their adversaries – cited serious losses, noting both surprisingly strong Ukrainian resistance and extremely poor Ukrainian battlefield leadership. By the time the negotiations opened, analysts in Russia and eastern Ukraine said the separatists were exhausted and probably lacked the reserves to finish the job in Debaltseve.¹⁹

C. *Russian Involvement*

Separatist forces were much more prominent in the first half of the offensive than in the August 2014 battle for Ilovaisk, which was largely fought by Russian regular units. In the first or second week of February, however, Russian troops, armour, artillery and, most crucially, senior officers appear to have been deployed.²⁰ The officers seem to have taken over the planning and direction of the final assault. Resorting to folksy colloquialisms, a well-informed source close to the separatists stated that “smart uncles from the North” had been sent to lead the battlefield strategy around Debaltseve.²¹ Western diplomats have made similar claims.²² A clear example of Russian regular-force deployment was the tank battalion from Buryatia, in the Russian far east, which crossed into Ukraine on 8 February and almost immediately saw action around Debaltseve.²³ This was about when separatist sources warned they were running low on reserves. Given the persistent reports of chaos and incompetence among Ukrainian senior commanders, such help would have been decisive.

Other Russian troops were almost certainly involved in the fighting.²⁴ Separatist news videos gave glimpses of small units in a different uniform working with separatist militia. Some had advanced equipment, including drones, and operated independently on occasion, at other times in a combat-advisory capacity. Faces were often pixelated

¹⁸ The training was supplemented by a purge of what Donetsk militia officials called marginal and anti-social elements. Some units were broken up and commanders dismissed. At least one was ambushed and shot by armed men an official described as coming from the Luhansk prosecutor’s office. Officers of Russia’s Federal Security Service allegedly told an independent-minded commander they could not guarantee his security if he returned to Ukraine from leave in Russia. In March 2015, he reportedly overcame his differences with DNR leaders and resumed his command. “General Petrovsky has returned to Novorossiia”, www.novorosinform.org/news/id/24684, 9 March 2015. Soon after this, however, he was rumoured to have been again forced out of Donetsk. Crisis Group phone communication, Donetsk residents, 22 March 2015.

¹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Donetsk oblast, early February 2015. Some separatist sources say that most of their reserves had been committed by late January. Shortly before Minsk, the Donetsk leadership called a mass volunteer mobilisation to replenish its forces.

²⁰ The Russians also made adroit use of jamming, disrupting Ukrainian troops’ main means of communication, the cell phone. Crisis Group interviews, senior diplomats, Kyiv, 13 March 2015; senior state official, Kyiv, 18 March 2015.

²¹ “умные дяди из севера” [“Smart uncles from the North”]. The North” refers to Russia; the term “uncle” as used here suggests an authority figure. Personal communication, Crisis Group analyst, February 2015.

²² Crisis Group interviews, senior diplomats from different countries, Kyiv, 11, 13, 19 March 2015.

²³ “Мы все знали, на что идем и что может быть” [We all knew what we were going into, and what might happen] *Novaya Gazeta*, 4 March 2015.

²⁴ On 17 February, an independent airborne assault brigade in Volgograd, an air hour or so from the border, was suddenly put on alert for unexplained exercises. The announcement, published on its in-house website, was entitled “on alert, into battle”. The unit was deployed in Ukraine in 2014. It is not clear if it saw action this time.

out or kept off camera.²⁵ Western and separatist military specialists also suggested that regular Russian crews manned many of the new tanks and heavy artillery pieces the separatists had acquired since October 2014. Separatists routinely complain that they cannot find local specialists in these fields.²⁶

Signs of advanced weaponry also began to leak out. Two days after the ceasefire went into force, for example, the organiser of a Russian blog specialising in military armour was shocked to see a new model battle tank in a DNR news report and expressed surprise at the security breach. A reader responded: “Didn’t anyone tell you when you were a kid that a loudmouth is a boon for a spy?”²⁷

Coverage of the fighting in the Russian media indicated that Moscow was gradually shedding the cloak of secrecy that had surrounded its military involvement. The Buryat tank crewman cited above described in passing a major staging operation in the Russian Far East for troops heading to Ukraine.²⁸ A few days after Debaltseve, the Russian business daily *Kommersant* interviewed young soldiers who said they had volunteered to fight in Ukraine and were on what amounted to open-ended secondment from their units. The paper speculated that there would be more volunteers in the event of a spring offensive. After a pause of a month or two, “someone” will decide that Donetsk cannot survive without Mariupol and other cities, it suggested. “Then in military bases across the whole great country [Russia], ‘political officers’ will again be activated, with stories of how important it is to help the freedom-loving Donbas against the West’s aggression”.²⁹

Fighting continued throughout the Minsk deliberations. At Russian insistence, the ceasefire did not come into force until midnight on 15 February, almost three full days after the conference ended, and even then the pause was brief. DNR “President” Alexander Zakharchenko, for example, signed a ceasefire order for his troops at midnight on the 15th but was in combat on the front line the next day. He denied this was a violation of the Minsk agreement. Debaltseve, which the DNR claimed as its territory, was not mentioned in the final document. “According to the Minsk agreements”, he explained, all illegal armed formations on the territory of Donbas are to be either dispersed or disarmed. We are disarming illegal armed formations”.³⁰ The separatists later described the town’s capture as a “correction” of Minsk II.³¹

Western diplomats in Kyiv and NATO officials say the Russian command and control elements have not been withdrawn.³² That suggests a significant, qualitative change

²⁵ See, for example, “Уличный Бой за Дебальцево. Начало Штурма 07.02” [“Street fighting for Debaltseve. Beginning of the Storm 07.02”], www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfgPo8kumny.

²⁶ The problem was most recently discussed in an extensive review of the offensive by a separatist participant posted on a separatist website, <http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/2106302.html>, 24 March 2015.

²⁷ http://gurkhan.blogspot.be/2015/02/blog-post_16.html.

²⁸ “We all knew what we were going into”, op. cit.

²⁹ “в пампасах Донбасса” [“In the Donbas pampas”], *Kommersant*, 20 February 2015.

³⁰ “Из Дебальцево Захарченко заявил, что город почти взят, бои идут в центре” [“From Debaltsevo Zakharchenko announced that the city is almost taken, fighting is taking place in the centre”], <http://rusvesna.su/news/1424108898>.

³¹ The term was used by separatists and their supporters in several conversations with Crisis Group. A variant can be found in <http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/2106302.html>, 21 February, По Дебальцево.

³² See, for example, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg’s statement in Riga, 18 February 2015, www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/europe/2015/02/18/nato-urges-russia-withdraw-forces-eastern-ukraine/23621147/. Western diplomats in Kyiv continue to report the

in Russian military assistance and the strong possibility they will be part of any future combat.

IV. Debaltseve: A Political and Military Defeat

Debaltseve's loss was a blow to the Poroshenko team on several levels beyond the military. Official comments on the fighting were usually slow, often wrong. The information gap was filled by separatist media, which, despite strong ideological bias, was often more accurate and faster, and used videos from the front to support its claims. The reassuring Ukrainian official line was undermined by real-time complaints and denunciations of military and political leaders by their own soldiers at the front, who contacted the media by social media or mobile phone. As the position became more dire, officers started to call on the government to pull out before they were fully encircled. Those on the ground reported that, by 16 February, chances of an orderly withdrawal were slender. The next day, a deputy battalion commander told a Kyiv-based journal the separatists controlled 90 per cent of Debaltseve, with all roads out mined, and asked media support for organising an evacuation corridor. Senior commanders "do not have a grasp of the situation", he said; some had simply "dumped" their units.³³

A. Distorted View from Kyiv

The picture in Kyiv was very different. On 18 February, President Poroshenko announced that "our troops left the area in a planned and organised manner with all the heavy weaponry" and described the operation as "strong evidence of combat readiness of the armed forces and efficiency of the military command". The withdrawal had put Russia to shame, he said.³⁴ Fighters promptly posted graphic and very different descriptions.³⁵ A battalion commander, for example, dismissed Kyiv's assertions that the General Staff had executed a planned withdrawal. He and other field commanders, he said, improvised the withdrawal when they saw how quickly the situation was deteriorating and senior officers were not responding.³⁶ His com-

presence of senior Russian officers tasked with command and control duties. For example, Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 19 March.

³³ <http://nv.ua/publications/debalcevo-na-90-zahvacheno-idut-ulichnye-boi-zamkombata-25-go-batalona-34951.html>. The same day a spokesperson of the National Security and Defence Council announced that Debaltseve was not surrounded. <http://todaynews.kz/snbo-ukrainy-zayavlyaet-cto-ni-o-kakom-kotle-v-debaltsevo-rech-ne-idet-gorod-ne-okruzhen>.

³⁴ www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/poroshenko-russia-was-put-to-shame-in-debaltseve-video-transcript-381113.html, 18 February 2015.

³⁵ "Wounded and exhausted fighters are still coming out of Debaltseve from time to time we hear an exchange of fire on the front line, and then silence. Someone did not make it out". Facebook, Юрий Касьянов [Yuri Kasyanov], 19 February 2015. A special forces officer later remarked that the first time he and his men laughed after a week of fighting was when they read government statements describing the retreat as well planned. Facebook, Yuri Butusov, 23 February 2015.

³⁶ Uncredited interview with the commander of the 25th territorial defence battalion, posted 21 February 2015. www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Dj7RKTfknHo. Another version of the interview is at http://censor.net.ua/resonance/325755/debaltsevskiyi_platsdarm_gotovili_k_sdache_shtaby_u_nas_jili_otdelno_voyiska_otdelno_komandir_25go_batalona.

ments and those of other combat officers underlined the deep gulf between them and more senior officers, usually from the rank of colonel up.

The fall of Debaltseve is the second major Ukrainian loss of troops and materiel in six months. Though details are sketchy, between 6,000 and 8,000 Ukrainian troops were originally said to be in the combat area. The government speaks of pulling out just over 2,000 and has not explained the discrepancy. Separatist military sources claim that the retreating forces left hundreds of tanks, armoured vehicles and other equipment behind. Ukrainian sources say two U.S.-provided lightweight, counter-mortar radar systems were lost during the fighting or retreat.³⁷

President Poroshenko's efforts to portray a disaster as a victory – particularly his claim of minimal casualties during the withdrawal – came in for withering attack from political critics. “When you announce six killed and thirteen injured on the retreat from Debaltseve, you just destroy your authority and people's trust in you”, Borys Filatov, a member of parliament and close associate of Igor Kolomoysky, the multi-millionaire businessman and governor of Dnepropetrovsk oblast, wrote on his Facebook site. He finished by urging the president not to “live by lies”.³⁸

B. Command Weakness – Military Anger

The problems Debaltseve exposed in Ukrainian military leadership were nothing new to Western observers in Kyiv or their Ukrainian counterparts. They had been glaringly apparent during the Ilovaisk defeat. Military professionals have long used terms like “disastrous” and “hopeless” to describe the high command. The problems are ascribed to the general demoralisation, corruption and neglect of the defence establishment under the previous presidents, a process that reached its apogee under Viktor Yanukovich, when Russian penetration of the security and military establishments became endemic.³⁹ Fears of Russian penetration have made Western governments reluctant to share intelligence with Kyiv and further damaged the defence establishment's reputation. “When I look at the [high command] performance in a crisis, I am never sure where Russian penetration ends and pure incompetence begins”, said a close observer.⁴⁰ Ukrainian security specialists are equally concerned: “75 per cent of the military's problem is the top leadership”, said one.⁴¹

If the deteriorating situation is not addressed, it could take on a dangerous political dimension. After Ilovaisk, angry volunteer battalion commanders denounced government “treason” and called for a march on Kyiv.⁴² This time the anger comes from professional officers of the regular army, a much less politicised and more disciplined group. A dangerous gulf seems to be growing between the president and combat officers. The Poroshenko administration needs to talk with the angry officers to reestablish

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Ukrainian official, Kyiv, 19 March 2015.

³⁸ www.facebook.com/borys.filatov?fref=ts 18 February 2015. Filatov was quoting the late Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn when he used the phrase “live by lies”. Kolomoysky resigned as governor on 25 March after a fierce public dispute with the president. Unian news agency, 25 March 2015, www.unian.net/politics/1059567-poroshenko-podpisal-ukaz-ob-otstavke-kolomoyskogo.html.

³⁹ See Crisis Group Report, *Ukraine*, op. cit., especially Section II.C, “Military Command Paralysis”.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Western military observer, Kyiv, March 2015.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, security adviser to Ukrainian parliament, Kyiv, 12 March 2015.

⁴² See Crisis Group Report, *Eastern Ukraine*, op. cit.

trust and fire the senior officers who have proven unreliable or incapable in the field.⁴³ It should probably consider promoting the mid-level officers – captain to lieutenant-colonel – who have proven themselves in combat and calling for international assistance to train a new generation of junior military leaders. But the president has often been reluctant to dismiss senior officials he considers personally devoted to him. He “has no sense of urgency” in such matters, a senior Western diplomat commented, though time is a scarce political commodity in Ukraine.⁴⁴

The high command problem is a glaring example of a larger problem that could soon take on primary importance in Ukraine’s multifaceted crisis: the president’s obsession with micro-managing decisions in all fields, aversion to delegation and habit of putting personal loyalty above professional competence. Many Ukrainian observers feel he must abandon this behaviour if he is to keep the country together.

V. Kyiv and the East: Mirror Images

The main narrative embraced by both sides is one of distrust and hostility. Neither seems committed to seeing the Minsk process through to the end, and neither is looking for common ground. Both appear to hope for an external saviour.

The DNR and LNR leaders want more territory, without which, they feel, their position is untenable. They are also probably keen to make the most of the burst of Russian support – illustrated by the last days of the Debaltseve battle – before it fades again. They are only too aware that Kremlin support for their cause is determined by their utility; in the autumn of 2014, a prominent DNR figure acknowledged the eastern separatists were, on balance, a “burden” for Moscow.⁴⁵ More recently, a DNR official said the Russian struggle to regain Ukraine could well last for decades. Moscow’s interest in the separatist entities could wane much faster, he added.⁴⁶

The Ukrainian calculation is more high risk. While President Poroshenko wants UN peacekeepers – something he is unlikely to get, not least because of the Russian Security Council veto – some government hardliners, especially in the security sector, seem not averse to resuming the war. They and some Western observers are convinced U.S. weapons could make a major difference in the military balance, or at least in the Russian calculation of acceptable gain and loss, and that only one person

⁴³ On 12 March, officers from the Debaltseve campaign published an open letter to the president calling for dismissal of senior officers whose incompetence contributed to the collapse. “Troops call for the dismissal of those guilty for the Debaltseve defeat”, Ua News, 12 March 2015, <http://112.ua/statji/voennye-trebuyut-uvolit-vinovnyh-v-porazhenii-pod-debalcevo-otkrytoe-pismo-prezidentu-202968.html> 112. The defence ministry dismissed the letter as a “provocation”. “Rebuttal by the Ministry of Defence”, *ibid*, 12 March 2015, <http://112.ua/statji/oproverzhenie-ministerstvom-oborony-pisma-voennyh-s-trebovaniem-otstavki-vinovnyh-v-debalcevskom-kotle-polnyy-tekst-203323.html> 112.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 11 March 2015.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 13 October 2014. Crisis Group Report, *Eastern Ukraine*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 16 November 2014. Crisis Group Report, *Eastern Ukraine*, *op. cit.*

is preventing this assistance: President Barack Obama. Another separatist attack, some hope, might tilt the scales in Washington.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, each side accuses the other of the same violations, such as removing heavy weapons in accordance with Minsk II in preparation for visits by OSCE monitors, but returning them when the monitors leave.⁴⁸ There are daily claims of shelling and, most importantly, reciprocal allegations of plans for imminent offensives.⁴⁹

In an angry response to a new law on special status for eastern areas – a furtherance of Minsk II’s political chapter according to Kyiv, a violation according to Donetsk – the DNR’s Zakharchenko made clear that he saw no future for the self-proclaimed republic within Ukraine’s constitutional framework:

Poroshenko does not understand one thing: we, the Donetsk People’s Republic, we are no longer Ukraine and will never return to Ukraine We must occupy all our towns where the referendum was held [referring to the May 2014 separatist-organised vote on the east’s self-determination] and then work with Ukraine as equal partners.⁵⁰

VI. Conclusion

The threat to the Kyiv government is serious and growing. There is a real risk that Russia will test its military and political resilience again in the coming months. This time a separatist offensive may include substantial Russian troops, materiel and, most of all, command and control – in essence, a joint operation. The Russians are moving ahead with training the separatists, while the Ukrainian command still seems caught up in inner turmoil, and Western training of Ukrainian troops is only about to start. Close observers agree that a direct confrontation between the Russian and Ukrainian armies would end in another defeat for Kyiv. The final word on an offen-

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, government official, Kyiv, 11 March 2015; senior Western diplomat, Kyiv, 13 March 2015. Western supporters of military aid argue that the need is immediate and urgent: “Without some help, Ukraine will be seriously hurt by Russia, diplomacy notwithstanding. Their stocks of artillery munitions and spares are very low. Their anti-tank weapons are inadequate against the latest model Russian tanks. Without this assistance easily provided by neighbours, there will be no reason for Putin to bow to diplomacy”. Communication from prominent U.S. military observer, 29 March 2015.

⁴⁸ See, for example, the widely-read Information Resistance website for 19 March 2015: “Fighters are hiding tens of ‘withdrawn’ self-propelled artillery pieces and Grads in the Donetsk woods”, <http://sprotyv.info/ru/news/14834-boeviki-pryachut-desyatki-otvedennyh-sau-i-gradov-v-lesah-donet-chiny>. For a DNR version, “Сказки Великоанадольского леса” [“Tales of the Velikoanadol’skiy wood”], <http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/2015/03/12/#post-colonelcassad-2086738>. Both reports are probably accurate, independent observers say.

⁴⁹ Ukrainian sources report major separatist troop build-ups around Gorlivka, just outside Donetsk City, in Luhansk and around the major port city of Mariupol. Senior officials believe an offensive could start in mid-April, Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 18 March 2015. And from the pro-separatist side, “Militia intelligence says Ukraine will take the offensive in two weeks”. Rusvesna News, 19 March 2015.

⁵⁰ Quoted, Colonel Cassad website, <http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/2015/03/17/#post-colonel-cassad-2095238>, 17 March 2015. A number of these towns and cities, including Mariupol and Kramatorsk, have since been retaken by Ukrainian forces. Kramatorsk is now home to the Ukrainian military command for the Donbas region.

sive, however, lies with Moscow. Russia has been a truculent and changeable ally to the separatists, given to improvisation rather than consistent strategy. It may yet transpire that Moscow was not totally satisfied with the return on investment from the recent offensive and will prove less pro-active next time. It has many problems of its own, including an ailing economy, the substantial costs of absorbing Crimea and the impact of financial sanctions.

Given the uncertainty, however, the international community, especially Western nations, need to have a long-term strategy if they are to maintain cohesion. Equally important is to work from the assumption that President Poroshenko's ability and willingness to confront Ukraine's other enormous problems head on are as vital to its survival as rolling back Russian intervention. Kyiv has to deliver on all fronts: reform – which is underway but still has far to go – anti-corruption and outreach to the population of the east, as well as improvement of the military leadership. Its friends have been urging it to move fast. Further delay may be extremely costly.

Kyiv/Brussels, 1 April 2015

Appendix A: Map of Ukraine

