

Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter

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Executive Summary

Winter in Ukraine is injecting further uncertainty into an already volatile conflict. Concerns are increasing about the strong risk of a humanitarian crisis in the south-eastern separatist-held areas of Donetsk and Luhansk. The separatists have a rudimentary administrative structure, few competent administrators, ill-trained militias and little in the way of a long-term strategy. They will be hard pressed to survive the winter without major Russian aid – financial, humanitarian or military. Ukraine, meanwhile, is dragging its feet on implementing reforms to address its manifold economic problems. Both Kyiv and the separatists are under pressure from their war lobbies. The near-term risk of further hostilities is high. There is an urgent need to halt the conflict, separate the troops, deploy substantially larger numbers of international monitors across the warzone and the Russian-Ukrainian border, as well as take immediate steps to assist civilians on both sides.

The separatists are clearly aware of their vulnerability, both in terms of security – their militias are a bewildering array of uncoordinated and poorly led military units – and in political terms – their inability to provide basic services for the population could seriously undermine their support base. They also admit an ambiguous relationship with Russia. They say that Moscow will intervene to avert major military or humanitarian catastrophes, but has no plans to recognise the separatist entities or provide major development or reconstruction aid. And they say that while Russia is playing a long game for the control of Ukraine, they are trying to stay alive for the next six months.

Renewed hostilities could take a number of forms. A Ukrainian offensive would almost certainly trigger a Russian military response, as Russian forces showed when in August 2014 they inflicted a devastating defeat on Ukrainian troops in Ilovaik, near Donetsk city, stopping their hitherto successful offensive. The geographical status quo has prevailed since then. A ceasefire brokered in September has been largely ignored. A powerful group within the separatist leadership feels that they will not survive without more land, and clearly wants to resume offensive operations, in the belief that this would also bring in the Russians. Separatists are hoping for another “Russian Spring” – their term for Moscow-encouraged and fomented seizures of power in other south-eastern oblasts. And, should weather conditions impede resupply of Crimea by sea this winter, Moscow may intervene to open up a land route from the Russian border through Ukrainian territory. Either move would undoubtedly be viewed by the EU, U.S. and other supporters of Ukraine as a major escalation and lead to further sanctions.

EU and U.S. sanctions may well have deterred a further Russian advance along the Black Sea coast after Ilovaik, and seem at the moment to be deterring any substantial separatist advance beyond the current frontline. They have also added to the pain of Russia’s economic downturn. The EU’s tough line on sanctions surprised Moscow, which assumed that consensus in Brussels would quickly disintegrate. But there is little sign that either the U.S. or the EU have thought about ways to de-escalate when the need finally arises. Russia is following a similar improvisatory path. It underestimated the implications of annexing Crimea or intervening in eastern Ukraine.

It protects the entities from Ukrainian attack, but seems reluctant to do much more than that.

Improvisation needs to be replaced by communication between all sides. This would help defuse tensions, perhaps prepare the ground for consultations between the main warring parties, and allow all sides to concentrate on humanitarian assistance in the coming winter. Russia could confirm that it has no plans to recognise the separatists. It could reject the idea, often floated in Kyiv, of a major Russian offensive in the spring. Kyiv could similarly promise to refrain from offensive military operations during this period. It could spell out publicly and clearly to the people of the east what political solution it has in mind for their areas after the war, and offer a clear assurance that it will, with Western assistance, help rebuild the east. Such an approach by all sides would not only help Ukraine weather a dangerous winter, but also allow it to emerge in the spring with hope for the future.

This report concentrates largely on one of the lesser known aspects of the crisis – the thinking and capacity of the separatist leadership, their relationship with Moscow and their views of the future. It does not present an overall analysis of the U.S., European Union and member states' policies on the crisis.

Recommendations

To stabilise the security situation in the east and start building confidence on all sides

To the Ukrainian government and separatist leaders:

1. Open channels of communications on humanitarian, economic and social issues to reinforce efforts to achieve a political solution.

To Russia:

2. Declare that Ukrainian predictions of a Russian or separatist offensive in coming months are baseless; spell out the exact nature of its political relationship to the separatist areas of the east, in particular that Moscow has no plans to recognise their independence.
3. Propose negotiations with Kyiv to resupply Crimea by land during the winter, using the 2003 agreement with Russia and Lithuania as a precedent; and offer wholehearted support for a significant increase in the number of monitors on the ground in the south east.

To Ukraine:

4. Announce that it will refrain from offensive military actions in the south east during winter.
5. Agree to facilitate the delivery of emergency humanitarian assistance, if needed, to the separatist-held areas.
6. Consult with the international community on ways to lessen the impact for non-combatants in Donetsk and Luhansk of presidential decree 875/2014, which declares illegal any bodies established by the separatists on the basis of their 2 November elections, and removes all Ukrainian government institutions from separatist areas.
7. Reach out to the east, particularly Ukrainian citizens in separatist-controlled areas, and stress its abiding concern about their well-being; and address accusations that Ukrainian troops have shelled urban areas in Donetsk and elsewhere, and announce an open and transparent inquiry into such claims.

To Russia, the EU, U.S., Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other international actors involved in the peace process:

8. Move urgently to demilitarise the conflict by substantially increasing monitors on the ground, both to separate the forces and closely observe the Ukrainian-Russian border; and declare the Donetsk airport neutral territory under international supervision.
9. Draw up contingency plans for major emergency relief operations in Donetsk and Luhansk if the situation continues to deteriorate.
10. Urge separatist and Ukrainian leaders back to the negotiating table.

11. Continue to urge the Poroshenko administration to reach out to the population of the separatist-controlled areas.

To the EU, U.S. and other parties engaged in the peace process:

12. Review sanctions policy to create incentives for Russia to de-escalate, and move away from a sanctions policy that is open-ended and does not identify trigger events specific enough to allow for their gradual removal.
13. Declare a willingness to make significant financial support available for the speedy restoration of Donetsk and Luhansk once a solution to the conflict has been found.

Kyiv/Brussels, 18 December 2014

Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter

I. Introduction

In late February 2014, after months of mass protests on Kyiv's Independence Square – Maidan Nezalezhnosti, which gave its name to the movement –, President Viktor Yanukovich fled the country with Russian assistance.¹ A power vacuum quickly developed in eastern Ukraine, his home base. Yanukovich's Party of the Regions disintegrated, followed soon by the politicised and highly corrupt security structures. The vacuum was filled by demonstrators calling for closer relations with Moscow, or even absorption by their northern neighbour. Crimea's swift declaration of independence from Ukraine and subsequent reincorporation into the Russian Federation led activists in the south-eastern oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, and their supporters in Russia, to believe that they could repeat the scenario in eastern Ukraine. Instead this triggered eight months of war, during which at least 5,000 people, and probably more, have died.

While most south-eastern oblasts resisted and ultimately suppressed pro-Russian demonstrations, protesters, rarely more than a few thousand, seized government buildings, barracks and security force arsenals throughout Donetsk and Luhansk. By May, most of the two oblasts were in separatist hands. Soon after his election in late May, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko launched a major military operation – officially known as an Anti-Terror Operation (ATO) in the east. By the summer, the separatist Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) had lost much of the land it had seized, and had concentrated its forces in and around Donetsk city. Its counterpart in Luhansk was even further reduced.²

Research was conducted in Brussels, Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk city and oblast and Moscow.

¹ Speaking at the annual Valdai conference, Putin admitted that he had helped Yanukovich flee, first to Crimea and then to Russia. See <http://kremlin.ru/news/46860>, 24 October 2014. He noted that he urged Yanukovich to stay in the capital and not to withdraw riot police from Kyiv. "Yanukovich said: 'yes, I understand' Putin recalled. He then left [the capital] and ordered all forces of public order removed from Kyiv. Great guy (Красавец тоже)". Ibid.

² The Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, widely known by their Russian initials DNR and LNR, are not recognised by any country. Similarly, no country recognised the results of the 2 November legislative and presidential elections. Russia expressed respect for the vote, but was careful not to say it recognised the result. Moscow makes it clear Donetsk and Luhansk are part of Ukraine, and stresses that Kyiv must bear the burden of supporting them financially, including the eventual cost of reconstruction. For purposes of simplicity, the entities are referred to in this report by their self-proclaimed titles, DNR and LNR.

II. From Ilovaik to Minsk

August 2014 was one of the bloodiest months of the war. Donetsk city was shelled frequently, its population dropped from just under a million to around 600,000,³ and Ukrainian troops were on the offensive across much of the DNR-controlled territory. In the middle of that month, officials in Moscow watched the successful Ukrainian offensive with concern. The operation was going “a little too far”.⁴ At the end of July, separatist leaders in Donetsk warned Moscow that they could not hold out for more than a few weeks without major Russian military assistance.⁵ Fears of a total separatist defeat, which Russian specialists have likened to the 1995 destruction of the Serbian enclave of Krajina, triggered a major Russian military response.

The Russian offensive was preceded by the abrupt removal of two key Russian figures who had played a decisive role in the early days of the DNR.⁶ The personnel changes coincided with an infusion of Russian weaponry, and almost certainly Russian troops. Igor Strelkov, the main military leader of the separatist uprising, hinted strongly at this in a message to his supporters in September. When he left the east, he recalled, “Donetsk and the whole of the DNR armed forces were surrounded” and fighting for existence. But only a few people in Donetsk knew that “literally in the next few days, the enemy would be dealt a crushing defeat”.⁷

This came in Ilovaik, a railway junction town half an hour’s drive to the east of Donetsk city and about 50km from the Russian border. The Ukrainian capture of Ilovaik would have closed the noose around Donetsk city, cutting it off from most resupply routes. Fighting had been going on there for weeks. On 23 August, a large combined force of Ukrainian volunteer battalions and regular army was deployed in and around the town. The volunteer battalions were largely so-called second echelon units, intended to round up DNR militia stragglers and restore order rather than engage in conventional warfare. The next day the Ukrainian forces came under intense artillery and mortar fire, often guided by drones and delivered by modern weaponry that far surpassed their own equipment.⁸ More attackers cut off their retreat. “We were waiting for you”, a Russian soldier later told a Ukrainian prisoner.⁹ The bombardment inflicted heavy casualties.

³ Figures provided by the Donetsk city council. Crisis Group interview, 13 October 2014.

⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, Moscow-based official who specialises in Russian policy to Ukraine and other former Soviet states, mid-August 2014. For further background, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°231, *Ukraine: Running out of Time*, 14 May 2014.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Donetsk, 13 October 2014.

⁶ On 7 August, the entity’s prime minister, Alexander Borodai, before the war a Moscow-based political commentator close to radical nationalist media and movements, was replaced by Alexander Zakharchenko. The following week Igor Strelkov, the pre-eminent military leader of the separatist uprising – an ardent supporter of direct and massive Russian intervention, of the creation of Novorossia, a state carved out of seven Ukrainian oblasts, and a frequent critic of Moscow for not providing enough aid – left for Russia without explanation or farewell. Many DNR military commanders were shocked by Strelkov’s departure, and remain loyal to him, while he continues to lobby his supporters in the east to take a hard, aggressive line.

⁷ обращение стрелкова [Address by Strelkov], vk.com/gubarev, 11 September 2014.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, officer, Mirotvorets battalion, Kyiv, 18 September 2014. The Ukrainians deployed three drones, which were quickly shot down. Two of the three newly trained drone controllers were killed during the retreat. Crisis Group interview, Dnipropetrovsk, 26 September 2014.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 18 September 2014.

On 29 August, Vladimir Putin took the unusual step of appealing publicly to the “Novorossia militia” to provide safe passage for the survivors, a sign that the Kremlin was watching the operations closely.¹⁰ The Ukrainian troops suffered many more losses when Russian tanks and armour strafed them as they retreated through the corridor.¹¹ Putin claimed that this was because the Ukrainian forces had used the pause in combat to regroup and resupply. “This causes mistrust”, he said on TV.¹²

DNR and Russian officials insist that only local militias were involved in the fighting, while Ukrainian troop and commanders say they were hit by elite Russian units with advanced weaponry. Ukrainians taken prisoner during the battle recount conversations with Russian airborne troops stationed in the Russian cities of Pskov and Kostroma, as well as soldiers from a motorised infantry brigade based in Shatoi, Chechnya.¹³ Several senior Ukrainian officers retreated with wounded Russian troops in their vehicles, a fact that eased their passage out of the Russian military encirclement.¹⁴ Ilovaisk inhabitants also later recalled that the fighting in their town had been between Russian and Ukrainian regular forces.¹⁵ Chechnya-based Russian troops told a prisoner that they had been required to sign demobilisation forms before being deployed in Ukraine. They added that they expected to be attached to DNR forces along with all their equipment.¹⁶

Ukrainian officials admit to just over 100 killed on the operation. Those involved in the fighting, as well as at least one regional governor, say the real death toll is at least 1,000, and probably more.¹⁷

The Ilovaisk defeat demoralised the Ukrainian leadership. A leader in the south-eastern oblast of Dnipropetrovsk voiced a widely-held view that the defeat left the rest of the east and south at the mercy of the DNR and its allies.¹⁸ A Ukrainian general intimately acquainted with the Ilovaisk operation was blunt, “we could have

¹⁰ “Президент России Владимир Путин обратился к ополчению Новороссии” [“President Putin appealed to the Novorossia Militia”], 29 August 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/news/46506>.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, journalist and junior battalion officer who survived the retreat, Kyiv, 18 September 2014; ranking Ukrainian army officer, eastern Ukraine, late September 2014.

¹² “Interview with Vladimir Putin”, Russian TV Channel 1, www.1tv.ru/news/polit/266628, 31 August 2014. There are other versions of the rationale for the attack on retreating troops. These include the allegation that the ranking Ukrainian commander was unwilling to abandon heavy weaponry during the retreat. Whatever the reason, the corridor was a traumatic and scarring experience for the survivors.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, journalist and junior battalion officer who survived the retreat, Kyiv, 18 September 2014. A ranking Ukrainian officer involved in the fighting cited the same Russian units. Crisis Group interview, eastern Ukraine, late September 2014.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, ranking Ukrainian military officer, eastern Ukraine, late September 2014. Videos also showed modern Russian military equipment on the battlefield.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Ilovaisk, 14 October 2014.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, 18 September 2014. In late August, Ukrainian forces captured ten Russian airborne troops just south of Ilovaisk. Russian military authorities claimed the men had crossed the border by accident. The men said they were from Kostroma. See “Relatives of airborne troops arrested in Ukraine have gathered in Kostroma”, 26 August 2014, http://tvrain.ru/articles/v_kostrome_sobralis_rodstvenniki_zaderzhannyh_v_ukraine_desantnikov-374566.

¹⁷ The higher figure is cited by a number of observers, including a security adviser to a senior Ukrainian politician. Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 30 September 2014. The number of missing in action or taken prisoner has not been established. In a visit to Ilovaisk on 14 October, DNR then-premier Zakharchenko said that prisoners of war included 98 members of the Donbas volunteer battalion. These would not be exchanged, he said, but would be made to work in the city and possibly local mines. Crisis Group observation, Ilovaisk, 14 October 2014.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Dnipropetrovsk, 25 September 2014.

handled the separatists, but we can't fight the Russian army". This is the end of the war, and President Poroshenko understood this, he added.¹⁹ The defeat also left the Ukrainian military short of weaponry. A month after Ilovaisk, a Ukrainian general and influential politician described a visit to a military sales exhibition in Kyiv. Asked what they were looking for, the politician laughed. "Everything", he said.²⁰

Ilovaisk was far from a total victory for the separatists, however. The DNR militias wanted to push on and take back the land they had lost in recent months. Instead, said a senior DNR politician: "The Russians told us 'stop!' Our troops were to go no further". The politician said he disagreed with the order. "But we cannot refuse: we are dependent on those who help us".²¹ The Russian troops also went no further. Officials working on Minsk talks noted around the same time with some surprise that separatist leaders were suddenly more amenable to negotiations.²²

The 5 September negotiations in Minsk resulted in the declaration of a ceasefire and an agreement to separate the warring parties.²³ A particularly controversial clause at the time was Ukraine's agreement to classify the separatist areas for a limited period as zones with special status. The wording was reportedly written by a senior Putin adviser, Vladislav Surkov, and was deliberately kept "creatively obscure" in its details, an international participant in the negotiations remarked.²⁴ Political sources in Kyiv later said that Russia had threatened to resume and extend its military offensive if the idea was not incorporated into the agreement. A Ukrainian deputy premier later claimed that the passage of a law on special status had forestalled a "full-scale offensive".²⁵

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, ranking Ukrainian army officer, eastern Ukraine, September 2014.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, eastern Ukraine, 25 September 2014. Six weeks later, speaking in Donetsk, a top separatist leader said that the Ukrainians were firing prohibited ammunition like cluster bombs "because they don't have anything else left". Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 16 November 2014.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 13 October 2014.

²² Crisis Group interview, senior diplomat, Kyiv, 22 September 2014.

²³ The negotiations were held under the auspices of a Contact Group composed of Ukraine, Russia and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Separatist leaders from both Donetsk and Luhansk were also present. The two separatist representatives signed the final memorandum, but the document did not identify their geographical affiliation or their political positions in two separatist regions. The OSCE published the protocol, but only in Russian See: www.osce.org/home/123257. The Ukrainian government posted an English-language version on its website: <http://mfa.gov.ua/en/news-feeds/foreign-offices-news/27596-protocol-the-results-of-consultations-of-the-trilateral-contact-group-minsk-05092014>. On 19 September, the Group agreed on a memorandum outlining measures to stabilise the ceasefire. See, in Russian, www.osce.org/home/123806.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior diplomat, 22 September 2014. For more on Surkov, see Section III.C.

²⁵ "Владимир Гройсман: законы о Донбассе остановили полномасштабное наступление" ["Vladimir Groysman: Laws on the Donbas stopped a full-scale offensive"], *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, 24 November 2014.

III. Reaction to the Minsk Agreement

The Ukrainian and separatist leaders who signed the Minsk ceasefire protocol found themselves accused of many of the same sins by their political establishments. Volunteer battalion commanders in Kyiv spoke of treason and hinted at a coup; militia commanders in the east did the same. The signatories were accused of selling out their revolutions; some suggested that they had done a deal, most likely for corrupt purposes. Most importantly, many leaders in both camps claimed that Minsk had damaged their side's chances of survival. Ukrainian political leaders predicted a Russian or separatist offensive in the south east sometime in winter or early spring. The separatists warned that they controlled too little territory to be viable. Given this mood, it is no surprise that the ceasefire never really happened. Well over 1,000 people have probably been killed since the agreement came into force on 6 September.²⁶

A. Donetsk

The Minsk ceasefire agreement brought out into the open the sharp divisions within the separatist leadership, both political and military. More pragmatic leaders stressed the need for peace as a precondition to building a functional state that would aim for a slow and roundabout incorporation into Vladimir Putin's Russian world, through membership in Russian-created bodies such as the Customs Union. This, a senior government figure conceded, would be an extremely difficult task.²⁷

They were opposed by a powerful group of political and military leaders who viewed the situation as much more urgent and requiring forceful military action. The fundamental difference between the two camps lies in the future of the Novorossia project. While the DNR and LNR often refer to themselves generically as Novorossia, to most separatists, particularly the militias, the name means something much larger: a new state torn out of Ukraine that would encompass most of the south east of the country and the Black Sea coast as far as Moldova – a state with substantial agricultural, marine and industrial potential.²⁸ The Minsk agreement leaves the separatists with a tiny fraction of this – roughly about 40 per cent of Donetsk oblast and a much smaller proportion of Luhansk. Many separatist leaders, including a number of senior military commanders who are still in contact with Igor Strelkov, feel their current territory is not viable. They see the Minsk process as a disturbing tilt by the Kremlin away from the greater Novorossia and the radical nationalist line that they and their Russian nationalist allies espouse.²⁹

²⁶ International organisations estimate over 700 deaths, but base these on official figures, which they consider to be drastically underestimated.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 14 October 2014.

²⁸ The term was first raised post-Crimea annexation by Vladimir Putin in a lengthy phone-in on Russian TV on 17 April 2014. See kremlin.ru/news/20796.

²⁹ The Russian nationalists in question include Alexander Dugin, Alexander Prokhanov – both formerly strong supporters of Putin who have at times claimed to be close to him – and probably Sergey Glazyev, an adviser to the president. Dugin and Prokhanov expressed disappointment with what they saw as Putin's abandonment of the radical nationalist cause. Dugin was particularly eloquent: "In my view Putin is not a person but a concept, the bearer of a certain function. This figure has two sides, sun and moon, solar and lunar. The Sun Putin is the person who reincorporates Crimea, visits Orthodox elders, stands for the Russian people, the Putin we want. There is a lunar Putin – his shadow, which compromises, thinks of natural gas, betrays the children of Slavyansk."

They lashed out at the agreement and its signatories. Pavel Gubarev, a leading hardline separatist and proponent of a greater Novorossia, wrote that when he saw the Minsk document, “we wanted to spit on this ‘peace’”.³⁰ One of the most influential commanders, Alexei Mozgovoy, asked an interviewer “how could anyone sign an agreement which leaves us in the backyard of our own land? ... The passivity and weak character of the representatives who signed all this have brought us to this lamentable result”.³¹ “Within our current borders, we have very modest prospects”, said another prominent proponent of greater Novorossia. He implicitly criticised both Moscow and his own colleagues for the current state of affairs. “Moscow often takes decisions for us”, he noted.³²

Radically inclined leaders and commanders suggest the pragmatists, mostly current political leaders in the DNR, are motivated in part by corruption. “Novorossia does not suit the present DNR leadership”, said a militant, making it clear the leaders had financial interests in the current situation in Donetsk.³³ Mozgovoy alleged that much Russian aid disappears before it reaches the troops.³⁴ Strelkov, the former military commander, has made similar claims. Supporters of a fast push to create a greater Novorossia say it would put vastly more resources into the separatists’ hands and make their cause more attractive in the eyes of the Russian leadership. Waiting, they say, could prove fatal, since the DNR’s limited support on the ground could decline further as its ability to provide basic services during the winter weakens.³⁵

Senior militia commanders, urged on from Moscow by Strelkov, tried intermittently in September and October to call a military council to discuss the situation. The expectation was that most commanders would support the idea of creating a greater Novorossia as soon as possible. The DNR leadership expressed concern about the planned council and other signs of dissent. The dissidents, a top leader said, “are neither insignificant nor a minority”.³⁶ The leadership was eventually able to head off the council meeting, though deep signs of discord on this and related matters regularly surface.

Many ordinary people in Donetsk appear increasingly to have little love for either side and simply want their privations to end. For this reason most expressed optimism about the Minsk agreement, even though they received little hard information about the peace talks from the highly politicised media on both sides. Most residents obtain their news through the partisan Russian and separatist media. Ukrainian outlets, harder to access in the east, are mostly no less biased. People say they minimise interactions with DNR officialdom whenever possible, unsure how its representatives,

This Putin is much less remarkable”. See “Лунный Путин уволил меня из МГУ” [“The Lunar Putin fired me from MGU”], www.gazeta.ru/social/2014/07/01/6093433.shtml, 1 July 2014.

³⁰ See Pavel Gubarev’s Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/pgubarev/posts/941335609226518>, posted on 7 September. Rather confusingly, separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk sometimes refer to the area under their control as Novorossia.

³¹ Алексей Мозговой: наступление на Харьков и Одессу не только возможно, но и необходимо [“Alexey Mozgovoy: An assault on Kharkov is not just possible but necessary”], [Rusvesna.su news site](http://rusvesna.su/news/1413322782), 15 October 2014, <http://rusvesna.su/news/1413322782>.

³² Crisis Group interviews, senior government, security and military officials, Donetsk, October–November 2014. See also, *inter alia*, Мозговой: наступление на Харьков и Одессу не только возможно, но и необходимо, *op. cit.*

³³ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 13 October 2014.

³⁴ [“An assault on Kharkov is not just possible but necessary”], *op. cit.*

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 13 October 2014.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 13 October 2014.

at best inexperienced and arbitrary in their behaviour, will respond. Many stay because they have nowhere else to go, or because they have deep family roots in the area. A lot, however, move in and out of Donetsk as much as possible, depending on the military situation or for other needs, such as medical care or attempts to register for pensions in one of the Ukrainian-government held areas. Thus the population of Donetsk, which had dropped to 600,000 in August, was well over 700,000 by October.³⁷

B. *Kyiv*

The Ukrainian leadership faced a similar backlash. Many Ukrainian political leaders and activists were deeply critical both of the ceasefire and of Poroshenko's secretive approach to negotiations.³⁸ They described Minsk as a temporary pause that would allow the rebels to rest, train and resupply, and complained that extending special status to separatist-occupied areas amounted to tacit recognition. They predicted a major separatist offensive, in the spring or even before, through the southern and eastern oblasts from Kharkov and on through Odessa to the Moldovan border. "Poroshenko has lost the war We have to hope that Putin does not have enough brains to realise how weak we are", said a major politician and businessman with national ambitions. "Destabilisation of the rest of the east and south has already begun", and "the Russians have a strong fifth column working there", he added, singling out two prominent local politicians in Kharkov. Regional governors in most of the vulnerable oblasts have done little to shore up their internal security. The country will look very different by the spring, he concluded ominously.³⁹

Many share this pessimism. "We have allowed Putin to impose a significant part of his agenda on us", said an adviser to a coalition leader.⁴⁰ "Poroshenko has sanctioned the creation of terrorist republics. It is only a question of time before Putin moves further – at the very least with the land bridge linking Crimea and mainland Ukraine".⁴¹ A land bridge would provide a means to resupply Crimea, especially in the winter, when bad weather hampers the peninsula's resupply by sea. It would most likely stretch from the Russian border through the occupied town of Novoazovsk and the major Ukrainian-controlled port of Mariupol, and then south and east to the Crimean peninsula. "The Russians want Mariupol at any price", said a ranking Ukrainian commander in the east.⁴²

Poroshenko also faced fierce criticism from the military, particularly the volunteer battalions that had been fighting in the east. They had already complained of the government's failure to equip them properly, to provide battlefield support or medical evacuation, and at the regular military commanders who abandoned them when the situation became dire.⁴³ After the Minsk agreement, some officers openly threat-

³⁷ Figures provided by the Donetsk city council. Crisis Group interview, 13 October 2014.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, parliamentary candidate, Kyiv, 9 October 2014.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, eastern Ukraine, September 2014.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 1 October 2014.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 30 September 2014.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, eastern Ukraine, September 2014.

⁴³ Such complaints are a common feature of most conversations with volunteer veterans. Crisis Group interviews, officer of one battalion, 16 September 2014; journalist who was caught up in the fighting, 18 September 2014; and officer of the Mirotvoretts battalion, 18 September 2014. Two of the three had been in the battle for Ilovaisk, the third had seen combat elsewhere in Donetsk oblast.

ened to “turn their guns against the traitors in Kyiv”.⁴⁴ Many troops voiced such feelings in Ilovaïsk during the fighting, said a participant in the battle. “Of course”, he added, “most of those who said that did not come out alive”, as they had been in the thick of the fighting.⁴⁵

No officer or unit has so far tried to carry out these threats, and the government publicly plays down the allegations. However, at least one prominent politician, Andriy Parubiy, the former secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, has travelled regularly to the front to address the soldiers’ complaints.⁴⁶ Some demonstrations by soldiers have been reported in Kyiv and elsewhere.

The suddenness and secrecy of the Minsk agreement added to growing doubts about Poroshenko harboured by members of the political elite, particularly former Maidan democracy activists. The agreement sparked speculation that he had done a behind-the-scenes deal with Vladimir Putin. Many observers spoke of their “constant” telephone conversations, fuelling suspicion that Poroshenko was running a “parallel negotiating track” with the Russian president, one in which “Putin was the dominant partner”.⁴⁷ The law on special status – though only symbolically important – was passed by the parliament in one closed evening session.⁴⁸

Growing frustration with Poroshenko may have contributed to his setback in the 26 October parliamentary elections,⁴⁹

C. *The Other Minsk Negotiator*

Senior Western diplomats say that Vladislav Surkov, a long-time political strategist and ideological adviser to President Putin, advised both sides in Minsk.⁵⁰ DNR leaders confirm this. Senior DNR officials say Surkov kept their negotiators on a tight rein. They were basically told “just sign the document”, said one.⁵¹ For Poroshenko he probably drafted the crucial point in the agreement – the temporary “special status” for the DNR and LNR within Ukraine.⁵²

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, battalion officer based in the east, Kyiv, September 2014. He said he shared these sentiments.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 18 September 2014. One of the two generals commanding the Ilovaïsk operation allegedly left the battlefield when combat intensified. Three battalion commanders have called for the general to be put on trial. “Battalion commanders demand Litvin be put on trial for Ilovaïsk”, Anews.com website, 10 September 2014.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, security adviser to a senior politician, Kyiv, 30 September 2014.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, TV executive, Kyiv, 9 September 2014; government official, Kyiv, 3 October 2014; security official, Kyiv, October 2014.

⁴⁸ Separatist leaders say Poroshenko is probably the only leader in Kyiv who would be open to an agreement, but most say they would never deal with someone they hold responsible for thousands of deaths in the east. Crisis Group interview, senior DNR leader, Donetsk, 16 November 2014. Senior Western diplomats agree that Poroshenko is more flexible than the other Ukrainian leaders. “Petro is a natural deal maker”, said one. Crisis Group interview, November 2014.

⁴⁹ The Poroshenko popular vote slipped slightly behind another block led by outgoing Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, whom separatists view as radically opposed to any agreement. Ultimately, however, the president’s bloc emerged as the largest grouping in the new parliament. The president then lost time with several weeks of wrangling over parliamentary alliance and cabinet seats.

⁵⁰ The information was first published in Elisabeth Pond, “The end of deterrence?”, *IP Journal*, German Council on Foreign Relations, 23 September 2014. Senior Western diplomats closely following the Minsk process confirmed Surkov’s role in the special status debate. Crisis Group interviews, Kyiv, 1-2 October 2014. DNR officials and Russian sources subsequently also confirmed this.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior DNR political leaders, Donetsk, mid-November 2014.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, senior Western diplomat, Kyiv, 1 October 2014.

The Minsk agreement seems to have marked a change in the Kremlin's overseers for Donetsk and Luhansk. Previously, the main drivers of Moscow's Ukraine policy, had been Sergei Glazyev, Putin's adviser for regional economic policy, and Dmitry Rogozin, Russian deputy premier for military affairs, a former ambassador to NATO.⁵³ Both are closely connected to radical nationalist circles. Some relatively more pragmatic DNR leaders were happy to see them go. "These people played a very negative role by bringing Strelkov into the conflict, the security officer said".⁵⁴ "Surkov is now our main *kurator* [overseer, handler]", he added, noting that Surkov had prepared much of the Minsk package of agreements. A Russian observer said, however, that the Russian military and intelligence services would have their own *kurator*.⁵⁵

Surkov is the Kremlin's point person for the Caucasus and some other parts of Russia's near-abroad. When political tensions spilled onto the street in Abkhazia earlier this year, he flew there to calm passions. More recently, he has emerged as the spokesman and probable architect of a new considerably tighter political, military and security relationship with Abkhazia.⁵⁶ In Donetsk he has garnered mixed reviews. Some welcomed a handler less ideological than Rogozin or Glazyev, and expressed respect for what they described as his tough management style and sharp legal mind.⁵⁷ Supporters of greater Novorossia view him as anathema. From Moscow, Strelkov denounced the "Surkov-Lavrov-Zurabov" group who was nudging Putin away from the hardline DNR position. "How much longer can Surkov openly deceive VVP [Vladimir Putin], presenting his virtual successes as real accomplishments? And how long can the president be confident that Surkov and Company are still under his control?"⁵⁸

⁵³ Other DNR officials refused to comment on the roles played by Rogozin and Glazyev, but did note that they also consulted economic advisers working under Russian first deputy premier, Igor Shuvalov.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior DNR officer, Donetsk, October 2014. Glazyev was born in the eastern Ukrainian region of Zaporozhia.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, 25 November 2014.

⁵⁶ ДОГОВОР между Российской Федерацией Республикой Абхазия о союзнничестве и интеграции [Draft treaty between the Russian Federation and the Abkhazia Republic on alliance and integration], at <http://apsnypress.info/docs/13258.html>.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, top DNR official, 16 November 2014.

⁵⁸ Strelkov's statement was published on one of the most active separatist blogs, 20 September. <http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/2014/09/20>. Sergey Lavrov is foreign minister, and Mikhail Zurabov is the Russian ambassador to Kyiv and Russia's representative at the Minsk talks.

IV. Donetsk: A Suitcase without a Handle

A. *Diverging Interests: A Growing Gap between Donetsk and Moscow*

Few of the current separatist leaders knew where they were going when they seized power. Some hoped for immediate absorption into Russia. Others aimed at a broad degree of autonomy that would limit Kyiv's authority in the region to the absolute minimum. A few were veterans of a Donetsk separatist movement that emerged in 2005 and aimed for federal status within Ukraine. Some supported the Eurasianist ideas of the historian and ethnographer Lev Gumilev, a strong influence on radical Russian nationalists.⁵⁹ Many were opportunists. "Plenty of people wanted power. I think a lot of them had seen the Party of Regions leaders become very rich, and they wanted to do the same", said a senior security figure. "Certainly no one expected a war with thousands dead".⁶⁰

They are still improvising. The top leadership, which includes Zakharchenko, speaker of parliament Andrei Purgin and his deputy Denis Pushilin, rarely seem to work from offices, communicate by cell phones, and often meet in hotel cafés. They admit that they have few people with administrative experience necessary to run a city like Donetsk. They are not sure how much financial assistance they will receive from Moscow. "If there is a total humanitarian catastrophe, Russia will help", said a top leader. "Less than that, we'll see".⁶¹ The leadership is in private also frank about the degree of public support. Certain categories, they say, – middle class, business, those with a higher education or university students – are not strong supporters.⁶² Their support is deeper among pensioners, workers and in smaller towns and villages. The Russian leadership views us "like a suitcase without a handle", said a senior security official, "useless, but you can't bring yourself to throw it away".⁶³ Other senior officials agree that Russia views them largely as a "burden".⁶⁴

The ease of Crimea's absorption generated a powerful wave of euphoria throughout the Russian political leadership. Russian politicians say that the operation was largely improvised. "I can say with absolute certainty that there was no preplanning for the reunion of Crimea. During the Ukrainian crisis the opportunity, I would even say the necessity, presented itself and Russia took advantage of it", a former premier and head of external intelligence, Yevgeny Primakov, said in October 2014.⁶⁵

When Crimea became part of Russia on 18 March, Putin quickly shifted his attention to south-eastern Ukraine. First he referred to Ukraine's south-east oblasts as "historically Russian", and then a month later to Novorossia – the oblasts of Khar-

⁵⁹ Gumilev's ideas remain highly controversial. Putin is an admirer. At the opening of the Lev Gumilev Eurasian National University in Astana, in October 2000, Putin paid tribute to Gumilev's "centuries-old idea of the commonality and interconnectedness of the nations inhabiting the immense expanses of Eurasia: from the Baltics and the Carpathians to the Pacific Ocean". See <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/21625>.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior security official, Donetsk, 14 October 2014.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 16 November 2014.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 13 October 2014.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 14 October 2014.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, 13 October 2014.

⁶⁵ Yevgeny Primakov interview with a Lithuanian website, Delfi.lt. появилась возможность, и Россия воспользовалась ею ["The possibility arose and Russia took advantage of it"], 15 October 2014. Western and Russian observers say there were obviously standard contingency plans in place for military intervention in Crimea.

kov, Luhansk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa – “which were not part of Ukraine in Tsarist times”.⁶⁶ Separatist leaders saw a powerful signal of support.⁶⁷ The Kremlin’s mood was understandable. Putin’s polling ratings, always extremely high, had after Crimea reached the level of “almost total unity – a situation that is exceedingly rare in sociological research”, said one of Russia’s top pollsters, Lev Gudkov.⁶⁸ Igor Strelkov, who played a key role in Crimea and then turned to eastern Ukraine in early April, recalled that in his early days in Donetsk, “we in no way expected such a long war, so many civilian casualties. After Crimea we were in a state of euphoria”.⁶⁹

Kremlin enthusiasm seemed to wane in May, several separatist officials believe. By then it was clear that separatism was unlikely to expand to the other south-eastern oblasts, and greater Novorossia would probably not materialise without direct Russian intervention. When separatist leaders announced a referendum on “state independence” for 11 May, several DNR leaders recalled, Putin asked them to postpone the vote in order to create the “necessary conditions” for a dialogue with Kyiv. “Putin had obviously received a very good analytical paper on the subject. They told him that the Donbas is not Crimea – it will not drop on your lap like a ripe apple”, said one; “Putin felt there were other ways to advance the question”, said another. “We had no experience, no funding”.⁷⁰

The separatists refused, to Moscow’s surprise, and the referendum went ahead.⁷¹ Most thought they were voting for incorporation into Russia.⁷² Looking back, it was then that some DNR leaders and activists began to realise that their struggle would be longer and more complicated than they imagined, and that they would have to survive independently from Russia.⁷³ Moscow describes the separatist entities as part of Ukraine, and a problem therefore to be solved by Ukraine itself. After the Minsk agreement, Russian officials made it clear they held Kyiv responsible for rebuilding the war-damaged east. They warned the separatists that annexation of Crimea meant the eastern entities should not expect generous financial aid.⁷⁴ When Donetsk and Luhansk held presidential and legislative elections on 2 November, Russia expressed its “respect” for the outcome, but carefully avoided recognising

⁶⁶ “Прямая линия с Владимиром Путиным”, [“A direct line with Vladimir Putin”], 17 April 2014. www.kremlin.ru/news/20796. Novorossia was originally an administrative area created during the reign of Catherine the Great in the eighteenth century.

⁶⁷ Most senior DNR officials and activists interviewed in October and November said this.

⁶⁸ Lev Gudkov, *Pro et Contra* journal, “Путинский рецидив тоталитаризма” [“Putin’s totalitarian recidivism”], Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May-August 2014. Gudkov is one of the relatively few remaining public critics of the president’s policies.

⁶⁹ Strelkov radio interview, 6 November 2014, <http://govoritmoskva.ru/interviews/265>.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior DNR leaders, Donetsk, 14 October and 16 November 2014. Putin’s statement can be found on <http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/20973>.

⁷¹ The next day, Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied commenting on the refusal. “We need additional information”, he reportedly said. “These are new data”. “в кремле пока не комментируют отказ юга-востока украины отложить референдум” [“The Kremlin is not yet commenting on south-east Ukraine’s refusal to postpone the referendum”], News.w.com website, 8 May 2014, <http://news-w.com/63316-7180/n/63315-50657/>.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, top DNR leader, Donetsk, 14 October 2014. Other officials interviewed subsequently said the same thing.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, top DNR leader, Donetsk, 14 October 2014. “I think it was about then that we started to irritate the Kremlin”, another official remarked. Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 15 November 2014.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 13 October 2014.

them.⁷⁵ “Moscow does not really know what to do with us”, said a DNR politician. “They certainly do not want to recognise us, they will not let us join the Russian Federation, but they are providing military support. It’s a little strange”.⁷⁶

Senior DNR leaders speak of a growing gap between them and Moscow. “Our interests converge about 60 per cent of the time”, said one. “The gap is not in our favour”.⁷⁷ Russians paint a similar picture. “The Kremlin controls them [DNR and LNR] 60-70 per cent of the time on political issues”, and “about 30 per cent in military matters”, said a former presidential adviser.⁷⁸

On major issues like the Minsk agreement, the separatists were barely consulted. Russian observers say the Kremlin is frustrated by their refusal to understand that Poroshenko is their best chance of a settlement.⁷⁹ One of the key differences in viewpoint is that while the enclaves are fighting for survival, looking no further than next spring, the Russians are playing a long game, a senior DNR official said, ten to twenty years ahead. “Ukraine is their soft underbelly: Moscow can never allow it to fall into enemy hands. They will take it back eventually”.

B. *Russian Military Assistance*

Russian military assistance has been intermittently generous, separatist militia members say.⁸⁰ The “*voentorg*” tap – slang for Russian military aid in all forms, derived from the name of Soviet-era military department stores – was turned on and off, based perhaps on Russia’s level of satisfaction with the separatist leadership, or possibly to maintain a veneer of deniability. Russia has provided substantial amounts of heavy weaponry. The clearest sign of Russian assistance was the group of 1,200 fighters who returned last August after four months of training in Russia.⁸¹

Aid seems to at times be distributed on the basis of political loyalty. Zakharchenko’s own military force, the Oplot (Stronghold) battalion, is extremely well-equipped; so is the Vostok (East) brigade, which many officials say is supported by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).⁸² By contrast more unruly units such as Alexei Mozgovoy’s Prizrak (Ghost) brigade complained in November they had not even received food. Russian troops have intervened when Moscow felt the separatist enclaves were faced with mortal danger, but the Russian military has done nothing to turn the dis-

⁷⁵ “В Кремле призвали не приравнять “уважение” к “признанию” выборов в ДНР и ЛНР” [“Do not equate respect and recognition for the DNR LNR elections, Kremlin urges”], Interfax News Service, 7 November 2014, www.interfax.ru/world/405935.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 14 October 2014.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 16 November 2014. The official nonetheless described the Kremlin strategy as “very smart”.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, 20 November 2014.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, 25 November 2014. A ranking DNR official confirmed that talks were completely out of the question. “We will not talk to him after he has killed 4,000 of our people”. Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 16 November 2014.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Ilovaik, 14 October 2014.

⁸¹ Speech by Zakharchenko at DNR session, video, Youtube, 15 August 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjAvnUa1Wak.

⁸² “Много о важном” [“Much about that which is important”], Rusvesna news website, 4 October 2014, http://rusvesna.su/recent_opinions/1412429274. Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 15 December 2014. Dissident militiamen allege that Oplot is also funded by former leaders of Yanukovich’s Party of the Regions. See Chervonets interview at <http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/1845960.html>. Officials in Donetsk frequently voice the suspicion that Vostok receives a considerable amount of support from Donetsk steel magnate Rinat Akhmetov.

parate militia forces into a real army. The result is a bewildering multiplicity of units: Cossacks; an Orthodox Christian unit, now in schism; military groups with names like Sparta or Somalia, and many others known only by the name of their commanders. Should the situation deteriorate further, such groups could turn into a network of well-armed criminal groups or bandits, operating on both sides of the border.⁸³ Russia and Ukraine need to make contingency plans for any mass collapse of discipline within the militias.

Russian military advisers attached to militia units would have been welcome, several DNR leaders said. But other than a few volunteers, there were none. DNR military officials complain in particular of a dearth of trained and experienced officers. “We have maybe a handful of good officers in the militia: hardly any Ukrainian army veterans came forward to fight for their land”, said a militia officer. “Mostly we have nutjobs”.⁸⁴ Strelkov praised one militia battalion commander known by his radio call-sign of Motorola. He is a good soldier, and “a fine commander up to the level of platoon”. By his own admission Strelkov has never commanded more than 150 men.⁸⁵

Strelkov is a good example of the Russian strategy. The most senior Russian officer to work on the ground, Strelkov turned out to be a major headache for separatist leaders and Moscow.⁸⁶ A former colonel in the Federal Security Service (better known by its Russian initials FSB), with several tours in Chechnya and stints as a volunteer fighting in Bosnia and Transnistria in the 1990s, he is a cranky monarchist and admirer of the anti-communist White movement during the Russian Civil War. He is adored by radical nationalists in Moscow and some key DNR and LNR military commanders, but now increasingly described by the current DNR leadership as a deeply negative influence on the separatist revolt, who toward the end of his brief stay was “insubordinate”.⁸⁷

After involvement in Crimea in March, he arrived in Donetsk with about 50 men, seizing Slavyansk in northern Donetsk oblast on 12 April and several nearby towns soon after.⁸⁸ A senior DNR security officer says that Strelkov’s arrival marked the

⁸³ In mid-November DNR officials said they would purge the militia of “asocial and marginal elements” and attempt to create a single command structure. So far there has been no indication of major changes in either personnel or command. Some non-Ukrainian volunteers who were allegedly involved in serious criminality were reportedly sent home around the same time. Crisis Group interview, separatist leader, 11 November 2014.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Ilovaisk, 14 October 2014. The Russian term used was отморозок.

⁸⁵ Strelkov interview, 1 December 2014, http://rusvesna.su/recent_opinions/1417451815. In the latest sign of Strelkov’s disgrace in official Russian circles, his reference in the interview to his FSB rank, full colonel, was removed before it was published in Russia. See www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-strelkov-fsb-ties-russian-media/26721902.html [proper cite].

⁸⁶ Ostensibly, Strelkov is a volunteer, and indeed has a track record of fighting for what he would describe as Slavic causes in Bosnia and elsewhere. Russian, DNR and Western sources interviewed by Crisis Group all say, however, that he has links to the presidential administration in Moscow – probably somewhat attenuated now by his disputes with the Russian leadership over the future strategy in the east. He retains good relations with radical nationalist movements in Russia.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 16 November 2014.

⁸⁸ The first military incident involving Strelkov’s fighters was reported on 13 April, when they ambushed Ukrainian state security officers, killing one. “Один из руководителей сепаратистов из записей СБУ – прокремлевский пиарщик” [“One of the separatist leaders on the Ukrainian State Security recordings is a pro-Kremlin PR-man”], *Ukrainian Pravda*, 14 April 2014, www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/04/14/7022426/?attempt=1.

transition from demonstrations and building seizures to violence and disorder.⁸⁹ Other leaders say his abrupt withdrawal from Slavyansk in early July precipitated a military crisis that almost destroyed the separatist movement. The official quoted above claimed that Strelkov, who had become increasingly strident in his criticism of Moscow's failure to intervene, subsequently planned to withdraw most of the troops defending Donetsk to the Russian border, so as to precipitate a Russian intervention. Another senior official would neither confirm nor deny this claim, but agreed with the highly negative characterisation of Strelkov's role.⁹⁰

C. *Discord among the Militias*

Even after his recall to Moscow Strelkov has continued to inject discord into political and military debates in the separatist enclaves. Several key separatist units are either deeply critical of the civilian leadership, in particular DNR President Zakharchenko, or involved in what seem like political feuds with other major commanders. In mid-October a member of one of the main militia groups fighting at Donetsk airport launched an exceptionally scathing attack on Zakharchenko and his associates. In a video interview the fighter, who goes by his call sign Chervonets, accused the DNR leadership of excessive indulgence in alcohol, claimed that former members of Yanukovich's party were funding the separatists, and warned that military dissatisfaction with the political leadership is "off the scale". Militiamen had signed up to fight for Novorossia, not the current tiny piece of land, he added. He ended with a call for Strelkov's return to lead the armed struggle. His interview was quickly removed from DNR sites, and he was later reportedly arrested by Donetsk authorities.⁹¹

In November Sergei Petrovsky, a militia commander better known by his call sign, Grumpy, who is said to be a retired colonel in Russian military intelligence (GRU), lashed out at Alexander Khodakovsky, the Vostok brigade's commander and the newly appointed chief of the National Security Council. He accused Khodakovsky and his troops of widespread involvement in organised crime and incompetent leadership, among other failings.⁹² The attack seemed to be another sign that high-level infighting continues within the DNR leadership. Petrovsky was formerly Strelkov's deputy.

D. *Russian Troops in Donetsk: The Holiday Makers*

Few DNR officials confirm the presence of Russian troops but even fewer deny it. A senior official admitted that Russia has provided substantial amounts of weapons, regular military support and some training. But he argued that the Russian military role is more nuanced than Ukraine and the West believe. Like other leaders, he feels that Russia will not let DNR and LNR completely fail, but only intervenes militarily in crisis situations. "Serious Russian involvement in our armed struggle has only taken place when we were faced with an imminent threat to our survival", he said.⁹³

⁸⁹ Noting Strelkov's close links to radical nationalists, the official remarked, "I don't think he was a Putin project. If anything he was a problem for him". Crisis Group interview, senior DNR officer, Donetsk, October 2014.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 16 November 2014.

⁹¹ The video can be viewed on <http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/1845960.html>.

⁹² "Interview with General Petrovsky", Strelkov's website, Icorpus, 30 November 2014, <http://icorpus.ru/intervyu-s-generalom-petrovskim>.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, senior DNR officer, Donetsk, October 2014.

Other officials maintain that the largest numbers of Russian regular troops, mostly airborne, were deployed in Donetsk oblast during the Ilovaisk operation. They arrived in mid-August and were usually known, half in jest, as the “holiday makers” – a reference to then-Prime Minister Zakharchenko’s claim that several thousand Russian servicemen had spontaneously gone to Donetsk in their vacation time to fight alongside separatists, bringing all their equipment with them. The holiday makers were regular troops who had been ordered to remove personal insignia and identification marks, and had in some cases been required to hand over their mobile phones before being deployed to Donetsk.⁹⁴

A separatist military official who said he had for a time liaised with the Russian military estimated their strength as that of roughly one brigade, probably 3,500-4,000.⁹⁵ He claimed that a Russian force of this size could routinely be deployed in Donetsk oblast with very little advance notice. Other officials mentioned the presence of Russian advisers, both from the military and state security.⁹⁶ There is considerable agreement that the standard of militia training and leadership is substantially lower than the Russian regulars, and that most militia units are no match even for the hastily trained Ukrainian army. Most fighting around the key city of Mariupol in the days following Ilovaisk was carried out by Russian troops, Strelkov later observed. Once they were withdrawn from the area, the Mariupol front became “shaky”, he added.⁹⁷

Separatist leaders publicly play down Russian involvement. Privately, with the local population, they stress the degree of Russian military engagement. A university professor and strong supporter of greater Novorossia described to political science students the “impressive build-up” of Russian troops in Rostov oblast, just on the other side of the border. He noted with a smile that the troops often crossed into “contiguous states” by “roundabout routes” to exert pressure on Kyiv.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Ukrainians taken prisoner during the Ilovaisk operation, 18 September 2014.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, eastern Ukraine, November 2014.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 14 November 2014. A Ukrainian visitor to Snezhnoe, a town close to the Russian border that seems to be a military staging area, says that the local militia commander does not deny the presence of Russian troops in the area. Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 14 November 2014.

⁹⁷ Interview with a right-wing weekly, *Zavtra.ru*, 20 November 2014. “Кто ты Стрелок?” [“Who are you Rifleman?”], *Zavtra*, 20 November 2014. In the interview, Strelkov refers to the troops as “holiday makers”.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group observation, 13 November 2014.

V. Winter

A. Humanitarian Crisis

The first sign of winter weather brought fragmentary but disturbing reports of a decline in living conditions for many residents of Donetsk and Luhansk. In late November, Alexei Mozgovoy, a senior commander in Luhansk warned that the food situation near his home base in Luhansk was “catastrophic”. Around the same time one of the separatists’ main websites, Rusvesna, claimed that eighteen people in one village had died of starvation.⁹⁹ A recent visitor to the Luhansk towns of Pervomaysk and Stakhanovsk reported lines of pensioners and disabled, who had not received pensions for the last six months, waiting to receive a quarter of a loaf of bread each.¹⁰⁰ Most banks are not working, salaries, pensions and social benefits have not been paid for months.¹⁰¹

Elsewhere pensioners, single mothers and other vulnerable categories have received occasional payments from the separatist authorities. In early December, monthly pensions of about \$60 were paid out, along with child benefits of half that amount in parts of Donetsk city.¹⁰² There is no indication, however, that such payments will be more than sporadic. International health-care workers on the ground reported mortality was already increasing in the most vulnerable institutions on both sides of the line, such as mental hospitals.¹⁰³ “The situation is getting bad fast. We are facing a very serious humanitarian situation,” said a senior international official.¹⁰⁴

Another senior aid official was even more graphic: “Many people in rebel-held areas have little or no cash at all. No cash [means] no food. The banking system is not working properly, pensions are not paid, people who have re-registered out of rebel-held areas to get their pensions are facing “spot checks” [from security officials] to establish their real location of residence. People who have cash must decide between food, medicine or fuel. Health care is under severe strain”.¹⁰⁵ Several key international organisations say a 14 November presidential decree is seriously complicating any response to the humanitarian situation. The decree declares illegal any bodies

⁹⁹ “В одном селе от голода умерло около 18 человек, у них просто не было еды” [“In one village eighteen people died of starvation. They simply had no food”], Rusvesna, 24 November 2014, <http://rusvesna.su/news/1416771535>.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group email correspondence, Donetsk resident, 1 December 2014.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group email correspondence, Donetsk resident, 5 December 2014. Miners in one part of Donetsk city, Makiyevka, received a symbolic payment for the first time in months in early November. Médecins sans frontières (MSF) reports that most medical staff in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts have not been paid for months. “Ukraine: People ‘don’t know what the next months hold””, MSF, 1 December 2014. Even before the onset of cold weather Donetsk municipal officials had warned that at least 12,000 windows have been broken during the fighting. Given the city’s centralised heating system, any apartments with broken windows would be seriously affected by the cold.

¹⁰² *DNR.today*, official DNR newspaper, 7 December 2014.

¹⁰³ International officials were informed by the staff of one such institution close to the front line in Donetsk oblast that five had died in October, and twenty in November. The team was unable to ascertain causes of death, but noted disastrous hygiene, poor nutrition and a drastically reduced number of trained personnel. Crisis Group email correspondence, Donetsk, December.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group email correspondence, senior international official, Kyiv, 8 December 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group email correspondence, Stéphane Prevost, head of mission, MSF Ukraine, 8 December 2014.

established by the separatists on the basis of their 2 November elections. It also calls for the evacuation of all state institutions, staff, equipment and documentation.¹⁰⁶

This means, an aid worker notes, increased difficulties for the purchases of medicines: “pharmaceutical companies can no longer sell drugs if the destination hospital has been ‘evacuated’”. And aid organisations cannot donate medicine or equipment to illegal entities, and have increasing difficulty paying their staff.¹⁰⁷

Separatist leaders recognise their lack of territory and trained human resources, their poorly organised and undisciplined militias, and realise that their main patron may and often does have other priorities. But they cling fiercely to the belief that Ukraine can at any moment implode under the pressure of economic collapse and public anger at the excesses of the “Fascists” and “Nazis” who, they assert, are waging a reign of terror across the country.

Kyiv is indeed in the grip of a major economic crisis. Its foreign currency reserves are down to \$10 billion, enough to buy about six weeks of imports. Its gross domestic product (GDP) will decline by about 7 per cent in 2014. Coal production is slumped by 66% largely because mines are flooded, as a result of power cuts and war. Steel production is down by about one third.¹⁰⁸ Its leaders have recently warned of looming default. But there is a substantial difference between its situation and that of the separatist entities. It has the considerable benefit, however, of support from the International Monetary Fund, the U.S. and the EU, among other major international players. This support will not be endless. The separatist-controlled east, on the other hand, can only look to Moscow.

Though some UN aid is distributed to the temporarily displaced or those who are living in bomb shelters in separatist areas, the most visible source of assistance comes from the convoys of trucks emblazoned with the name of Rinat Akhmetov, the region’s leading industrialist. At least nine Russian humanitarian convoys have delivered over 10,000 tonnes of food, humanitarian aid and building materials, according to Russian official sources.¹⁰⁹ Some of these convoys have functioned outside the control of international monitors and Ukrainian officials. Doubts are frequently expressed about the nature and amount of the equipment brought in; a senior international official believes that the trucks have on a number of occasions carried back into Russia heavy machinery from the regions’ industrial plants.¹¹⁰

The speed with which signs of hardship are emerging will put pressure on both the separatists and Russia. If they do not receive aid, the separatists may be inclined to consider an all-or-nothing offensive, to try to seize land or pull the Russians deeper into the war. Moscow, on the other hand, is just realising the depth of its economic

¹⁰⁶ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАИНЫ № 875/2014 [Decree of the President of Ukraine Number 875/2014], available on the president’s website, <http://president.gov.ua>, in Ukrainian. The decree also rescinds the law on special status for Donetsk and Luhansk.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group email correspondence, Stephane Prevost, head of mission, MSF Ukraine, 8 December 2014.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group email correspondence, Anders Aslund, senior fellow, Peterson Institute, Washington DC, 7 December 2014. Aslund has advised previous Russian and Ukrainian leaders. Commenting on the situation in the east, he stated “the Ukrainian government must make sure not to spend any money [on the separatist areas], neither in the form of pensions, public services nor energy subsidies, given that it does not control the territory, its banking system or receive any tax revenues from that territory. Occupied Donbas can bleed Ukraine to death. That must not happen”.

¹⁰⁹ See for example “Russian humanitarian convoys returns home after delivering relief aid to western Ukraine”, Itar-Tass news agency, 30 November 2014, <http://itar-tass.com/en/russia/764396>.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior diplomat, Kyiv, 22 September 2014.

problems. It may be hard pressed to find money for the separatists even if it decides to change its policy.

The Ukrainian government should urgently consult with international organisations on the wording and intent of Decree 875/2014. It should take steps to facilitate the provision of assistance to the separatist-held areas, and should encourage increased international assistance to them. Isolation of the east would not only exacerbate the crisis: it would also deepen the east's alienation from Kyiv. This should be another way for the Kyiv government to reach out to the people of the east and reiterate that they are still viewed citizens of Ukraine.

B. *Military Scenarios*

Russian spring. Separatist circles have been talking about a second “Russian spring” for months. Seizing in particular on a series of so-far relatively minor incidents, including small explosions in Kharkov and Odessa, they have outlined a picture of imminent separatist revolts there and elsewhere, capitalising on economic hardship during the winter. Some say their militias would cross into the rebellious oblasts to support their fellow revolutionaries. While separatists claim to have considerable support in Kharkov, other south-eastern oblasts have taken serious steps to shore up their security. Dnipropetrovsk's billionaire governor, for example, has funded the creation of several volunteer battalions, not to mention the local production of drones. This scenario would either presuppose total insubordination on the part of the separatists – something that could not be ruled out if the situation in Donetsk and Luhansk deteriorates sufficiently – or Russian support.

Desperation. Should the humanitarian situation develop into a crisis, many separatist leaders will probably be tempted to make a wild grab for more territory – to prove they are still a powerful force, to improve their long-time viability, and perhaps to force Moscow to become more involved militarily.

Novorossia. After Ilovaïsk, grave concern was voiced in Kyiv at the danger of a Russian spring offensive in 2015 – a burst down the coast, probably spearheaded by Russian troops posing as local militias. This would in essence create the greater Novorossia. Most analysts, including Russian specialists, agree that such an action would take the confrontation to new and very dangerous heights. So far Russia has not offered an opinion on this. A statement that it has no such plans to do so, and would not look kindly on any other forces attempting this, could gain Moscow considerable credibility, and perhaps even defuse the situation enough to allow exploratory talks on de-escalation.

Land bridge. Harsh weather conditions often impede Crimea's resupply by sea in the winter. Should the situation on the peninsula deteriorate this winter, Russia may feel obliged to open up a land route. Separatist leaders in Donetsk are increasingly confident this will happen.¹¹¹ Once again there is a way that Russia could transform military threat into a diplomatic and public relations advantage. Moscow could propose the opening of talks with Ukraine to permit such a resupply route, under close

¹¹¹ For example a senior leader outlined a detailed “minimalist” strategy of Russian armour and special forces securing key junctions and similar strategic points along the route, rather than large-scale occupation. Their confidence is founded on hope that a major Russian intervention would result in increased interest by Moscow in their plight. Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, 16 November 2014.

international supervision if desired. It is possible that feelings are too raw, especially in Kyiv to try this. But there is a precedent: Russia and Lithuania signed in 2003 an agreement to allow Russian goods and passengers to transit Lithuania en route to its enclave of Kaliningrad.

Total war. A Ukrainian offensive cannot be ruled out. In August, a top ranking Ukrainian officer was convinced that his troops could not yet take on the Russian troops who would almost certainly be deployed if Ukraine launched another offensive on the separatist “people’s republics”. President Poroshenko sounds more confident. He recently said he was “prepared for total war”, and that he was “not afraid of war with Russian troops”.¹¹² A Ukrainian offensive could also prove disastrous for everyone. A statement by Kyiv repudiating any such plans would substantially defuse the situation.

¹¹² “Poroshenko says Ukraine ready for ‘total war’”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty website, 17 November 2014. The original interview published in the German weekly *Bild*.

VI. Conclusion

The situation in the east of Ukraine is often described as a still fluid conflict that could evolve into a long-term frozen one. In most frozen conflicts, however, there is enough stability for the state to function. But the entities huddling unhappily on small parcels of land in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts are not functioning. Russia would have to invest much more into the DNR and LNR to get them to that point, and it may no longer have the money to do so. A deterioration of conditions in the separatist areas will probably strengthen the hand of those commanders and politicians who feel war is the only answer.

It is obviously not in the international community's interest for that to happen. Emergency aid should be considered immediately. A clear statement by Kyiv on this would be helpful as the winter tightens its grip. The one advantage of winter, however, is that it slows down military operations. All sides need to take advantage of this lull to clarify their basic positions on all key issues, political and military. They could attempt to initiate a modicum of cooperation to address any humanitarian problems that could well arise this winter. And Kyiv could communicate to the population of the east that it still views the inhabitants of Donetsk and Luhansk, who will feel the brunt of any hardships, as full citizens of Ukraine.

Finally the EU, U.S. and other international players involved in the crisis should start planning now for a long and possibly cold relationship with Russia. They too could at least try to use any winter lull to open a free-wheeling discussion with Moscow on differences, suspicions, reproaches – and perhaps even areas of cooperation.

Kyiv/Brussels, 18 December 2014

Appendix A: Map of Ukraine

