

OVERVIEW OF MILITARY EVENTS IN EASTERN UKRAINE IN 2014–2015

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This chapter gives a short overview of the military conflicts that took place in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and 2015. The following overview was compiled by Capt. Andrei Šlaboviš, with an introduction provided by Vladimir Sazonov.

The military intervention of the Russian Federation in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 can be divided into four distinct phases. The Russian intervention of 2015 can be divided into three different phases. In their book about Russian aggression in Ukraine, Lt. Col. (ret.) Dmitry Tymchuk¹, Lt. Col. (ret.) Juri Karin, Col. Konstantin Mashovets and Col. (ret.) Vyacheslav Gusarov from the NGO Information Resistance, write that “the success of the special operations in Crimea gave Putin cause to think that he could easily conquer the southern and eastern territories of Ukraine”.² Taking control of the Donbas region, which is already mostly pro-Russian, would have seemed like an easy task for Russia at that time (2014). The seizure of the Odesskaya, Nikolayevskaya, and Hersonskaya oblasts, would also have seemed like an easy task for Vladimir Putin and his team.³

But in reality the situation developed otherwise and Russia was unable to complete even the minimum of its objectives that Putin had outlined for Eastern Ukraine before aggressions were initiated. Already in 2014 Russia and pro-Russian separatists were well short of the Kremlin’s programme, especially in regards to their military operations. Russia gained control over only a small part of Eastern-Ukraine. And the Russian-Ukraine conflict in the Donbas region continues to the present.

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² **Тымчук, Д.; Карин, Ю.; Машовец, К.; Гусаров, В.** 2016. Вторжение в Украину: Хроника российской агрессии. Киев: Брайт Стар Пабблишинг, р. 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Combat Activity in Eastern Ukraine in 2014

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Phase I: Provoking the military conflict (end of March – beginning of May 2014)

Igor Girkin (Strelkov) diversion group initiated its activities in Slavyansk and Kramatorsk on 12-14 April 2014. The first armed attack was directed against the representatives of the Ukrainian government as several key the buildings of the government and civilian-military authorities were seized. The group was clearly better organised and equipped than the other pro-Russian groups that were active during the same period of time (e.g. in Donetsk, Mariupol). It is possible that some important staff members of the Girkin group were already affiliated with the Russian Federation. The Cossacks were deployed to the areas of Antracyt and Krasnyi Luch.

Phase II: Escalation of the military conflict (May – beginning of July 2014)

An assault and defence group comprised of local pro-Russians and volunteers from the Russian Federation⁴ took control of the majority of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The Russian Federation supported these “volunteers” in every possible way, and provided them with equipment, and transportation to the conflict areas, and armaments and ammunition. The civil-military authorities of the Russian Federation were involved mostly with command and coordination, yet the direct military intervention of special forces and the participation of various specialists cannot be ruled out. It is also possible that with Girkin’s departure from Slavyansk, and his relocation to Donetsk at the beginning of July the involvement of the Russian Federation in Donetsk became indirect, and more emphasis was placed on the activities organised and funded by local oligarchs (e.g. Khodakovsky’s Vostok Battalion by Rinat Akhmetov). However, the arrival of Chechens and other volunteers from the Russian Federation to Donetsk and the first attack on the Donetsk airport on 25–26 May 2014 were obviously directly connected with, and supported by the Russian Federation.

⁴ However, the majority of them could be regarded as “mercenaries”: there is abundant information about hiring former servicemen for a remarkable reward.

Phase III: Direct intervention in the military conflict, the changing situation (July-September 2014)

Because the units were comprised of “volunteers” and as the local pro-Russians were unable to stop the Ukrainian offensive, the separatists were in danger of being isolated from the Russian Federation as well as from each other (e.g. seizure of the border areas by Ukrainian forces, the manoeuvre to the area between Donetsk and Luhansk), thus it is most likely that Russian forces were directly involved. From July 2014 the special forces and artillery units of the Russian Federation repulsed the operations of the Ukrainians near the border and supported the counterattacks of pro-Russians with everything they had in order to regain lost ground (e.g. the battles around Zelenopolye, Saur-Mogila, where attacks originated from both Donetsk and the Russian Federation). At first, the activities of the regular forces of the Russian Army were minimal, and most likely limited to border areas in the form of tactical battle groups of units up to the size of a company, while the participation of specialty units (e.g. artillery, air defence, etc.) was considerably increased. However, with the continued pressure on the part of the Ukrainians, the Russian Federation had to intervene with numerous regular forces (battle groups of several battalions), and this became the turning point of the conflict (the Ilovaysk battle). From that point on it was necessary for the Ukrainians to stop attacking and concentrate on defensive activities. After the battle on September 2014, it is likely that the majority of the Russian regular forces were withdrawn to the Russian border.

Phase IV: Stirring up the military conflict (September-December 2014)

After the successful operation against Ukraine in August-September, the Russian Federation continued its support of the conflict. The activities were relatively similar to those of the second phase (providing equipment, armament, and support with “volunteers”). However, there is some evidence that the percentage of former Russian military personnel (“persons on vacation” and “volunteers”) coming from the Russian Federation became higher in proportion to the locals. Compared to August, the involvement of the regular Russian forces in the form of special forces and specialists was reduced, yet they remained active in some places (e.g. attacks on the Donetsk airport). Russia’s support for rebels in the form of equipment and armament remained extensive. The Russian Federation continued to train “volunteers”⁵ who were prepared to participate in the conflict when and if needed.

⁵ The majority of them being reservists who retired recently or even servicemen in active service.

Combat Activity in Eastern Ukraine in 2015

The year 2015 began with a truce. The situation started to change in mid-January when hostilities resumed around the Donetsk Airport and other sectors of the ATO. Pro-Russian forces were provided with additional supplies and launched an offensive against both Donetsk and Mariupol. At the end of January, Zakharov – the “leader” of the Donetsk People’s Republic – announced the end to the ceasefire and the exchange of prisoners of war and started an offensive against the Ukrainians in order to “free” the entire territory of the Donetsk oblast.

Initially pro-Russian forces resumed attacks on the Donetsk Airport. After receiving reinforcements from the Russian Federation (Ukraine has documented the presence of the Russian Spetsnaz special forces in Ukraine as well as their losses there) and despite of the resistance of Ukrainians, the pro-Russians managed to almost cut off the new airport terminal from other Ukrainian forces. This made the provision of logistic support to the terminal garrison almost impossible. After the fall of the Donetsk Airport on the 22nd of January (2015), the frontline in Donetsk stabilized and has remained largely unchanged to the present day. The main effort of pro-Russians was to seize Debaltseve.

As a result of the battles in summer 2014, Debaltseve fell to the Ukrainians. Debaltseve was of vital importance to the Russian Federation since the Donetsk railroad passes through the city and it was once a major railroad hub. The railroad infrastructure was heavily damaged during hostilities, yet after taking control of Debaltseve, the pro-Russians managed to restore it and resume train traffic between the Russian Federation and Donetsk. This was extremely important as it guaranteed the regular and large-scale supply of pro-Russian soldiers directly from Russia via rail transport. Pro-Russian forces began to mass in the area around Debaltseve and started offensive at the end of January. There was fierce and heavy fighting and it was during this period that one of the largest combat operations of the entire conflict in Eastern Ukraine was undertaken. Both sides assembled large numbers of their combat units, and there were numerous signs that the battle groups of the pro-Russians’ were comprised of units formed from the Russian regular forces (mostly armoured units, Spetsnaz units and artillery units).

Hostilities lasted from the end of January to the end of February 2015 with about 3–5 thousand combatants on the Ukrainian side and about 15–19 thousand combatants on the pro-Russian side. A large number of indirect fire assets and armoured vehicles were used in combat activities; the pro-Russians carried out offensive operations with up to battalion-sized units

deployed against the fortified positions of the Ukrainians, with most of them being suppressed. However, the separatists were able to seize the strategically important villages of Uglegorsk, and then Logvinov a few days later, after the arrival of additional forces and by exploiting all the gaps in the Ukrainians' tactical control. With the seizure of Logvinovo, Ukrainian forces were in danger of being encircled, and therefore had to withdraw from the Debaltseve area with great losses. This also necessitated their abandonment of some of their equipment and weapon systems. The Debaltseve rail hub was taken by pro-Russians on the 18th of February, but this came at a high cost as the Separatists also suffered great losses with regard to both personnel and armoured equipment. There were reports that some Russian personnel were among the losses.

In parallel with the Debaltseve operation, the Ukrainian forces started an offensive operation towards Mariupol with the aim of recapturing the Shirokino settlement, which is located by the Azov Sea. The settlement had been controlled by Russian and pro-Russian forces since the beginning of September. The aim of the offensive was to reduce the pressure on the forces in the Debaltseve area and to exploit a favourable situation, as the majority of the separatists' reserves were concentrated in the area and committed to the occupation of the important railroad hub. The battles in Shirokino rapidly developed into positional warfare and lasted until the beginning of July when pro-Russians were forced to withdraw their forces from the area, and the settlement reverted to back to the control of Ukraine. Several Ukrainian units, including the Azov battalion of volunteers, (later regiment) participated in these battles. The Azov battalion was repeatedly accused of Nazism by the Russian media.

The wintertime battles in Debaltseve and other regions of the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts showed that the conflict parties had reached a state of impasse. The Ukrainians clearly lacked the military capability to respond with a counterattack (this was also due to political restrictions). The Pro-Russians, on the other hand, did not have enough forces to continue offensive activities to achieve their goals, i.e. clearing the Lugansk and Donetsk oblasts from Ukrainians. Therefore, Russian authorities had a choice of whether to further escalate the situation by bringing more Russian forces to the area, or to try to achieve some of their goals through negotiation. During the Debaltseve hostilities, an agreement was reached as a result of the Minsk multilateral agreements between the Russian Federation, Germany and France to establish a ceasefire. The ceasefire was to begin on the 15th of February, however, it actually started only after Debaltseve had been completely occupied on the

18th of February. The peace settlement meeting is commonly referred to as the Minsk II agreement.

The agreement required both parties to remove their heavy weapons (those of 100mm calibre or more) from the actual line of contact (in reality this process was delayed until the autumn). From the beginning of March until the end of April (2015) at the line of contact remained relatively quiet, although there were some incidents of fire exchanges between small units and contacts between opposing reconnaissance groups along different points of the actual line of contact. The situation started to escalate again at the end of May. On the 3rd of June (2015) about 1000 pro-Russians (including Russian volunteers) attempted advanced towards the settlement of Marjinka, west of Donetsk using indirect fire assets and tanks. The attack of the pro-Russians was suppressed and according to unofficial data sources they suffered heavy losses. The next notable battles took place in Starognatavka (towards Mariupol) and in Belaya Kamenka where there were company-sized battle groups. The outcome of these battles was hardly worth the effort.

At the beginning of September 2015 the parties again agreed to a cease-fire and continued the removal of heavy weapons. The situation in the front-line remained stable until the end of the year, although there were some exchanges of fire, and random indirect fire incidents that occurred. Reconnaissance groups carrying out diversionary activities and laying mines were active in the close rear area of both parties.

To sum up, the combat activities in Eastern Ukraine in 2015 can be subdivided into three phases.

Phase I

The 1st phase – the period of fierce fighting, from the beginning of January to the end of February (2015). Pro-Russians with the support of the units of Russian regular forces attempted to occupy strategically important objects in the Donetsk oblast. The occupation of the objects had either a propagandistic importance (e.g. the Donetsk Airport), or were of a military-economic importance (the Debaltseve rail hub). However, the broader goals set for this phase, which were most probably the destruction of the Ukrainian forces and occupation of the entire Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts were not achieved. This was the peak of the 2015 combat activity when Russian authorities tried to achieve their political goals through military means. By the end of the 1st phase the intensity of combat activity decreased considerably.

Phase II

The 2nd phase – during the summer offensive the activities of the pro-Russians continued mainly in the Donetsk oblast with the aim of improving their position and exerting influence on Ukrainian authorities. The level of combat intensity was considerably lower than that of the 1st phase. Most likely the pro-Russians had to mostly rely on their own resources as the participation of the Russian regular forces diminished. However, although the losses occurred during the very first days of the operation, the intensity of combat decreased rapidly until it was at the pre-operation level. Therefore, it is possible that the resources of pro-Russians were relatively limited (units composed of locals and Russian volunteers/mercenaries).

Phase III

The 3rd phase – during the autumn and winter, combat activity was of relatively low intensity along the line of contact. Mostly reconnaissance battles for were carried out for interference purpose and there were only occasional indirect fire attacks that took place. It is probable that there were also small Russian units involved on the separatists' side (mostly reconnaissance groups). The main purpose was to maintain tension, interfere with Ukrainians' activities, and create losses for them. Similar activities were also continued into 2016 and will most probably continue in the future as they do not require considerable resources, but are still an effective means of keeping Eastern Ukraine in a state of unrest.