

4. OVERVIEW OF POLITICAL AND MILITARY EVENTS



This chapter gives an overview of the political and military conflict unfolding in Ukraine in 2014. The events from April until December 2014 have been divided into phases.

4.1. Political Overview

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The political events unfolding in Ukraine after the Vilnius Summit can be systematised in the following way. For a detailed timeline, see Appendix 2. The first two phases describe the events before the research period of 1 April 2014–31 December 2014, yet we include them here because they help to decode the major events that took place during the research period.

Phase A: 21 November 2013–21 February 2014. EuroMaidan in Kyiv¹³⁷

On 21 November 2013 the Ukrainian government suspended its preparations for signing the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement.¹³⁸ This caused riots, civil unrest and demonstrations in Kyiv, which began on the same day in Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) in Kyiv.¹³⁹ On 27–28 November 2013 the third Eastern Partnership Summit took place in Vilnius.¹⁴⁰ Hundreds of anti-government protesters were killed in Kyiv during EuroMaidan between November 2013 and February 2014. The period ends with President Viktor Yanukovich leaving the country on 21 February 2014.

¹³⁷ See more about Euromaidan – Мухарьский 2015; Кошкина 2015.

¹³⁸ Кошкина 2015, pp. 22–23.

¹³⁹ Balmforth, R. 2013. Kiev protesters gather, EU dangles aid promise. – Reuters, 12.12.2013. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/12/us-ukraine-idUSBRE9BA04420131212>> (10.10.2017).

¹⁴⁰ The Third Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. – Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of European Union 2013, 2.12.2013. <<http://www.eu2013.lt/en/vilnius-summit>> (22.10.2016).

Phase B: 22 February 2014–1 April 2014. Annexation of Crimea¹⁴¹

On 21 February 2014 President Yanukovich signed the ‘Agreement on the settlement of political crisis’.¹⁴² On the same day Viktor Yanukovich left Kiev and moved to Kharkiv, some days later he was already in Moscow. Yanukovich was removed from office by the Ukrainian parliament on 22 February 2014. Also in February, the Crimean crisis began with demonstrations against the new Ukrainian government. Russian support of separatist politics culminated in March 2014 with the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. On 21 March Vladimir Putin ratified the inclusion of two new areas into the Russian Federation: the Republic of Crimea and the City of Federal Importance Sevastopol.

Phase I–II: 1 April 2014–30 June 2014. Pro-Russian offensive

This phase of the conflict leads to the armed conflict. On 7 April 2014 the so-called People’s Republic of Donetsk was declared. Militants took control of SBU offices in Donetsk and Luhansk.

Phase III: 1 July 2014–1 September 2014. Ukraine’s offensive

On 5 July, Slavyansk was retaken by Ukrainian forces. The battle of Ilovaysk (10.08-02.09.2014), a turning point in the war in Donbass, ended on 2 September as the Ukrainian forces withdrew from the area.

Phase IV: 24 August 2014–31 December 2014. Pro-Russian counteroffensive

A major offensive against Mariupol started at the end of August (24.08.2014). The first Minsk ceasefire protocol was signed under the auspices of the OSCE by both parties on 5 September 2014 in Minsk, but it failed.

The table below shows the four stages of the conflict during the period under research, plus the two preceding stages (A and B) taking place between the Vilnius Summit and the annexation of Crimea in March of 2014.

The table is followed by a summary of the military events during the four periods. The media events are elaborated further in Chapter 5.

¹⁴¹ See more Mölder, Sazonov, Värk 2014, Mölder, Sazonov, Värk 2015, pp. 1–28.

¹⁴² Signed by Yanukovich and the leaders of the Ukrainian parliamentary opposition.

Table 3. Overview of the Ukrainian crisis

Phase	Political events	Military events	Media
A	21 November 2013 – 21 February 2014 EuroMaidan	–*	–*
B	22 February 2014 – 1 April 2014 Annexation of Crimea	–*	–*
1	1 April 2014 – 30 June 2014 War in Donbass begins	End of March – beginning of May Provoking the military conflict	April Low variety of anti- Ukrainian information activities
2		May – beginning of July Escalation of the military conflict	May-June Multitude of anti- Ukrainian attitudes and narratives
3	1 July 2014 – 1 September 2014 Ukraine's offensive	July-September Direct intervention in the military conflict, changing the situation	July-August Multitude of anti- Ukrainian attitudes and narratives
4	24 August 2014 – 31 December 2014 Pro-Russian counteroffensive	September-December Stirring up the military conflict	September-December Multitude of anti- Ukrainian attitudes and narratives

*not analysed in the report

4.2. Military Overview

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The intervention of the Russian Federation in Eastern Ukraine can be divided into four distinct phases.

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

The first provocations were the activities of the Igor Girkin's (Strelkov) diversion group in Slavyansk and Kramatorsk on 12-14 April 2014. These included the first armed attack on representatives of the Ukrainian government and seizing government and civilian-military authority buildings. The group was clearly better organised and better equipped than other pro-Russian groups active during the same period (e.g. in Donetsk, Mariupol). It is possible that the key individuals in the Girkin group were associated with the Russian Federation. Bringing Cossacks to the areas of Antracyt and Krasnyi Luch.

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

Forming an assault and defence group based on local pro-Russians and volunteers from the Russian Federation¹⁴³, and taking control of the majority of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The Russian Federation supports its 'volunteers' in every possible way. They are recruited, trained, transported to their area, and provided with armament and ammunition. The role of the civil-military authorities of the Russian Federation mostly involves command and coordination; however, direct military intervention by the special forces and the participation of various specialists is also possible. It can be that the involvement of the Russian Federation in Donetsk was no longer direct when Girkin left Slavyansk at the beginning of July and moved to Donetsk. Emphasis switched to the activities of the powers 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 in Donetsk, as well as the first attack on the Donetsk airport on 25–26 May, were obviously directly supported by the Russian Federation.

¹⁴³ 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, changing the situation (July–September)

Since the units involving ‘volunteers’ and local pro-Russians were not able to stop the attack on Ukrainians, there was a danger of being isolated from the Russian Federation and isolated from each other (e.g. seizure of border areas by Ukrainian forces, manoeuvre in an area between Donetsk and Luhansk), thus most probably Russian forces were directly involved. From July the special forces and artillery units of the Russian Federation denied the activities of Ukrainians near the border and supported the counterattacks of pro-Russians with everything they had to restore the situation to normal (e.g. Zelenopolye, Saur-Mogila, the attacks were carried out from both Donetsk and the Russian Federation). At first, the activities of the regular forces of the Russian Army were somewhat limited, most likely in 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 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 Ukrainians had to stop attacking and concentrated on defensive activities. Possibly, after this battle during September, the majority of the Russian regular forces withdrew to the Russian border.

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

After a successful operation against Ukraine in August–September, the Russian Federation continued to support the conflict. The activities were relatively similar to those of the second phase (providing equipment, armament, and the supporting of ‘volunteers’). However, there is some evidence that the percentage of former Russian military personnel (‘individuals on vacation’) and ‘volunteers’ coming from the Russian Federation. Compared with August, the regular Russian forces in the form of special forces and specialists were less active, yet they remained active in certain places (e.g. attacks on the Donetsk airport). Russia’s support for rebels in the form of equipment and armaments remains high. The Russian Federation keeps training ‘volunteers’¹⁴⁴ who are prepared to participate in the conflict when needed.

¹⁴⁴ The majority of them being reservists who retired recently or even servicemen in active service.