The War in Ukraine - a disaster for the people and for peace in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Russia’s campaign in eastern Ukraine has reached an inflection point. Five months after signing a ceasefire agreement, Russian and separatist forces have moved from a preparation phase to a maneuver offensive launched by the separatist victory at the Donetsk airport on January 21, 2015. This new phase of the conflict presents a fresh set of operational decision points for the governments in Moscow and Kyiv. Will Russianbacked forces stop at the boundaries of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts [Provinces] and consolidate their gains? Will they seize Mariupol and then drive west to build a land-corridor to Crimea? Or will they prepare for much larger battles to take the pivotal cities of Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhia, whose capture would put the survival of the Ukrainian state in grave doubt? Will the Kyiv government commit reserves to defend against any of these contingencies? These decisions, much like the decision to seize the airport, will shed light on Moscow’s strategic objectives in Ukraine and Kyiv’s capacity to withstand them. They will also shape the evolution and quite possibly the outcome of this war.

Keywords: war; Ukraine; peace; Europe
1. INTRODUCTION

Russia’s strategic interest in controlling Ukrainian political affairs reflects Russian President Vladimir Putin’s belief in the need to maintain a buffer between NATO, the European Union, and Russia. The collapse of former President Viktor Yanukovych’s pro-Russian regime in February 2014 forced Putin to re-evaluate his strategy for controlling
Ukraine, particularly as it became clear that Ukraine’s new government was likely to be pro-Western and eager to join the EU and even NATO. Unable to rely on a proxy government any longer, Putin replaced his policy of economic coercion with one incorporating military coercion through successive operations. Both approaches pursued the same strategic goal of dominating Ukraine’s internal and foreign affairs.

Starting in the autumn of 2011, Vladimir Putin’s popularity rating began to fall noticeably. On the eve of the 2012 presidential election, the likelihood emerged that he would not be able to win in the first round. Such a scenario created the risk of significantly weakening Putin’s position and of undermining his legitimacy. Ruling the country in his customary authoritarian style as a “national leader” would become much more difficult.
What began as social and political protests two and a half years ago has since developed into an armed confrontation between Ukrainian troops with Western backing on the one hand and separatist forces with Russian support on the other. Estimates of combatant and civilian casualties lie somewhere between 6,000 and 50,000. Findings of WHO and UNHCR suggest that it is predominantly women, children and the elderly who are bearing the brunt of war - a phenomenon frequently observed in contemporary wars. The Ukrainian health system, already under pressure before the outbreak of violence, and suffering from limited resources and lack of health personnel, is struggling to provide health services to the local population, while at the same time treating the injured and the estimated 1.1 million internally displaced people. The situation is especially catastrophic in Eastern Ukraine. In the regions controlled by separatists, the population is cut off from government social services that cannot be adequately replaced by local authorities. UNHCR estimates that about 675,000 people have already fled the country. Of these, about 540,000 have sought refuge in Russia and 80,000 in Belarus. What is most urgently needed now is neutral international involvement (for example humanitarian aid from ICRC or the United Nations) and an immediate cessation of fighting. Support for any diplomatic efforts to achieve cease-fires is essential. Ceasefires are a prerequisite for a political process as well as a non-violent and fair reconciliation of the legitimate interests of all sides and can serve as a foundation for proper peace negotiations. We know from past wars that cease-fires frequently cannot be completely immediately implemented. However, this should not be used to discredit negotiations.

Map 3. Threat of war in Ukraine
Photo 1. Threat of war in Ukraine

Photo 2. Threat of war in Ukraine
The German affiliate of IPPNW is extremely concerned about the international dimension of the war in Ukraine and the confrontation between Russia and NATO, two nuclear powers. Instead of practising strict deescalation, both sides are currently issuing military threats and are contributing to further escalation of the war - through belligerent propaganda; through military manoeuvres in the Black Sea, the Baltic states and the Arctic Ocean, some of which even involve nuclear-capable forces; through the delivery of arms to both sides of the conflict; and through military advice and training.

On top of all this is the controversial separation of Crimea from Ukraine and its integration into the Russian Federation - a move held by many to be illegitimate under international law. Meanwhile, NATO is fuelling the conflict by deploying US troops in Eastern Europe, holding provocative parades right next to the Russian border, planning six new military bases in Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria as well as missile defense posts in Romania and Poland and creating a Rapid Response Force for Eastern Europe, in which Germany will play a substantial role. This mutual show of force is especially threatening due to the very real danger of a deliberate or accidental nuclear escalation.

The declaration by Vladimir Putin that he would have been ready to put the Russian nuclear arsenal alert during the Crimean takeover and that he informed his "Western colleagues" about this, shows how dangerous the situation has become. Until today, Russia and the US have a total of about 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert. They can be launched in a matter of minutes and could cause a global catastrophe. In January 2015, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists found the current state of world affairs to be so threatening that they moved the Doomsday Clock forward from five to three minutes before midnight - the closest the clock has been to midnight since 1984, when relations between the US and the USSR had reached a low point. IPPNW's declaration from that time still holds true today:

There is no meaningful medical response to the use of nuclear weapons. The catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons were the topic of an international conference in Vienna in December of 2014 and were poignantly described by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The use of nuclear weapons by the US or Russia would threaten the very survival of mankind. Moreover, the danger exists of a severe accident taking place in one of Ukraine's 15 nuclear power plants due to the continuing armed conflict - a threat which is often underestimated.

The Zaporizhia Power Plant – with six nuclear reactors – is located a mere 250 km from the besieged city of Donetsk. A military strike on a single nuclear facility would have severe consequences for the environment and the population.

The Ukraine crisis is affecting international disarmament efforts as well as the basic pillars of the European security structure, such as: the NATO Russian Founding Act, which contains a clause that prohibits stationing nuclear weapons in new NATO member states; the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), to whose joint consultative group Russia recently suspended its participation; and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), which prohibits the production, testing and deployment of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. It is a fact that there have been no disarmament talks between Russia and the US since 2010.
Map 4. Threat of war in Ukraine

The ceasefire was agreed by Ukraine, Russia, and the rebels on Sept 5.

In a conflict that has caused the worst Russia-West relations since the Cold War, the ceasefire came into effect at midnight on Feb 15.

As of June 2014, the ceasefire is still in place.

- Situation as of Feb 14, 2015
- Situation as of Sept 4, 2014

Key:
- Russian military presence
- Ukrainian Armed Forces
- MH17 crash site
- Recent ransom
- Rebels
- Rebels' control
- Border control
- Separatists' areas of control
- Town renamed from Luhansk to "Luhansk"
Instead, both NATO and Russia are investing billions into the modernisation of their nuclear arsenals, including the US B-61 nuclear bombs deployed at the German airbase in Büchel, which are supposed to be dropped by German pilots in the case of nuclear war.

The decision by the German Bundestag to obtain the removal of these weapons from German soil is no longer being pursued - according to Foreign Minister Steinmeier this is because of the crisis in Ukraine. Indeed it is due to the current crisis that deescalation is needed now more than ever. Not despite it, but because of the renewed confrontation between NATO and Russia, nuclear disarmament in Europe is more pressing than ever before. Instead, NATO member states have announced at their 2014 summit in Wales substantial increases in their military expenditure for the coming years. And Russia is also spending record sums on modernising its military. In light of the Ukraine crisis, any military buildup must be understood as threat of escalation. Meanwhile, Russian media are reporting a new generation of sea-launched cruise missiles with a range of 1,500 km. Because these missiles would be deployed on naval vessels, they would not fall under the provisions of the INF Treaty. According to Russian sources, this development is a response to the NATO threat. Regardless of whether these reports are in fact true or not, these developments show that we seem to be entering a new round of the arms race, with a completely new quality.

In March of 2015, Russia announced military investments of up to 300 billion until 2020; ten Iskender missiles, capable of carrying nuclear warheads, are stationed around Kaliningrad; test-battalions near the Ukrainian border; more NATO maneuvers than at any other time since the Cold War; 18 instead of 2 fighter jets over the Baltic Sea; parade of US heavy weapons in the Estonian-Russian border town of Narva; US plans for 2016: new weapon shipments to Latvia, Poland and Romania for 4,000 soldiers; weapon delivery to Ukraine from Lithuania and Canada; a promise of military aid of around 120 million US Dollar.

It is important to end the violence in Ukraine and return to internationally-accepted forms of non-violent conflict resolution - not just for the sake of the people in Ukraine, but in the interests of global peaceful cooperation. The violent confrontations in Eastern Ukraine have several, multi-dimensional causes. Besides the historical fault lines between diverse nationalities in Ukraine and the rise of nationalist movements, fundamental socio-economic tensions already existed since the beginning of the 1990's due to the privatisation of former state property, as well as rivalries between different groups of oligarchs who each claimed influence on the media and politics. On top of this, internal conflicts have been deliberately fuelled over many years by regional and international actors outside of the country. The final spark that lit the current geopolitical conflict was the decision by Ukraine's former president not to sign the Ukraine - EU Association Agreement at the end of 2013.

The attempt to bind Ukraine’s economy exclusively to the EU ignored the interests of the Ukrainian population. However, the EU denied that Yanukovych’s refusal to sign the agreement was rational in terms of domestic policy and blamed it entirely on Russian interference. The desire of the people on Maidan Square to escape their desolate economic situation through a leap to the West was fuelled by promises of prosperity, which the EU could at that point not even uphold for some of its Southern members. In addition, the EU and the US were deeply involved in the protests in Kiev from the very beginning. After the escalation of violence and the chaotic regime change in February 2014, the delegates of the Ukrainian parliament ratified the Ukraine - EU Association Agreement and President

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Poroshenko signed it into force - all of this just one month before elections were brought forward.

The country's neutrality, enshrined in the constitution of 1996, was abandoned by parliament in December 2014 in order to make way for NATO membership. In this complex situation, the levels and lines of conflict should not be simplified. The parties to this conflict are sometimes composed of very diverse groups. Differing approaches to the conflict by the EU and the US attest to divergent interests, as do the conflicting politics of Ukrainian Prime Minister Yatsenyuk and President Poroshenko. The Russian administration seems to be less and less capable of asserting military and political influence on the militias in Eastern Ukraine and Western Ukrainian militias are partly engaged in operations without orders from the government in Kiev. While a large part of the Russian population apparently backs its government's policy on Ukraine, there are also, just as in the West, divergent views and interests.

The German affiliate of IPPNW welcomes attempts by the German government to promote diplomatic initiatives aimed at ending the armed conflict. In contrast, we reject sanctions and advocate their suspension, as they do not contribute to a peaceful solution of the conflict but only intensify the confrontation. We see the Minsk Agreement, to which the German government contributed, as a chance to end the bloodshed and bring about a peaceful solution to the Ukraine conflict. The US plan to set up a missile defense system in Europe, as well as the steady eastward expansion of NATO and EU have both contributed significantly to a justified Russian suspicion of the intentions of the Western alliance. Added to this is the Russian perception of a military imbalance, as NATO and the US possess superior conventional military capabilities and, due to their "prompt global strike” capability, decidedly more options for intervention than Russia. Peace and security in Europe are only possible in cooperation with Russia, not in opposition to it. All European states, including Russia, have a legitimate need for security.

We should return to the concept proposed by Mikhail Gorbachev and former Minister for Special Affairs of Germany, Egon Bahr, that we all should live in a common "European House" and that we require a common security architecture. NATO has to make it absolutely clear towards Russia that it does not intend to corner or encircle it and it has to take back previous steps into this direction. We reject the eastward expansion of NATO as well as its interventions and troop deployments in the Balkans, Central Asia and the Middle East, as they are not compatible with policies geared towards peaceful cooperation. Although the path of dialogue will surely not be an easy one, in the end it is the only one that can lead to real peace. There can be no military solution to the confrontation between NATO and Russia or to the conflict in Ukraine.

What IPPNW Germany is doing It is a central goal of IPPNW to raise awareness about nuclear weapon policies and the current threats to existing arms control treaties, and to mobilise a broad public movement against the subsequent dangers. To this end, we are participating in protests at the German nuclear weapons base in Büchel, actively taking part in the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), supporting a ban on all weapons of mass destruction and encouraging all diplomatic efforts to deescalate the new East-West confrontation. In order to be able to issue a realistic assessment of the situation, German IPPNW has analysed background information, the different levels and root causes of the conflict. As a German peace organisation, our main focus lies in pointing out the possibilities of the West to contribute to deescalation. IPPNW Germany therefore directs its
demands primarily at the German government and its allies, but of course also addresses all
other parties of the conflict. With international action like the social media campaign "We
refuse to be enemies", we try to create a visible signal and to give a voice to the peace-loving
majority.

2. DONETSK

A dramatic escalation in hostilities followed Ukraine’s withdrawal from the ruins of the
new terminal at Donetsk airport. On January 22, 2015 an artillery or mortar shell hit a bus full
of civilians in the southern Leninskyi District of the separatist stronghold of Donetsk. The
attack, which left 13 dead and 20 wounded, prompted the DNR to shame publically a group of
POWs captured at the airport in front of an angry crowd, implying Ukrainian responsibility
for the attack. International observers from the Organization of Security and Cooperation in
Europe (OSCE) assessed that the shells were fired from the northwest, near the Ukrainian
artillery positions that supported the Donetsk airport defense. The Ukrainian Ministry of
Defense, however, blamed the attack on the separatists. DNR head Aleksandr Zakharchenko
seized the moment to proclaim that the separatists would no longer pursue ceasefire talks.

Operationally, the destruction of the new terminal pushed Ukrainian forces away from
Donetsk city, the biggest and most important urban center in separatist-held territory. ProUkrainian forces remain in artillery range of the city from areas between Avdiivka (north)
and Pisky (northwest), and also from Marinka (west), however, so the loss of the new
terminal at Donetsk airport did not alter the front line of separatist advance substantially.
While other flashpoints such as Debaltseve and Mariupol represent key maneuver objectives
for Russia and the DNR, the operations around Donetsk reflect consolidation for defensive
purposes in the short-term. As long as the front line runs through the outskirts of Donetsk city,
the separatists will not be in a position to coordinate wider offensive operations from the city.

This offensive capacity is key to Russia’s creation of a viable breakaway state within
the preexisting Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast lines. The creation of secure Russian proxy states
in southeastern Ukraine will also extend the Kremlin’s ability to influence Kyiv’s foreign
policy outcomes. As long as Russian proxy states exist within the internationally recognized
borders of Ukraine, NATO is unlikely accept Ukraine as a member. Given the obligation of
treaty signatories to defend one another, Ukrainian membership would bring NATO into
direct confrontation with Russia as long as the proxy states continued to exist. The creation of
defensible proxy states, or a single united state, thus serves Russia’s grand strategic objective
of creating a security buffer between its own borders and NATO.

3. DEBALTSEVE

Debaltseve is a key rail and road hub between the separatist-held cities of Donetsk and
Luhansk. It constitutes the most forward position of pro-Ukrainian forces at the front line of
separatist control between the DNR and the LNR. It is surrounded on three sides by separatist
forces along the Minsk Protocol demarcation line. As many as 8,000 Ukrainian soldiers and
volunteers are trapped in Debaltseve, according to separatist reports. Volunteer units such as
the “Donbas” battalion, a mechanized battalion under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, are
operating there alongside formal Ukrainian forces represented primarily by the 128th Mechanized Brigade. It was on the verge of falling under separatist control as of February 2, 2015.

While separatist elements from both the DNR and LNR have subjected the outlying areas of Debaltseve to regular shelling since Ukrainian forces recaptured it on July 28, 2014, this Ukrainian stronghold was not directly contested until late January 2015. Flanked by the Russia-backed separatists from the west, south, and east, the government-held city of Debaltseve faces complete encirclement in early February 2015. The DNR leadership has described the city as a “cauldron” referring to maneuvering the pro-Ukrainian forces into a Kesselschlacht or “cauldron battle”. The Soviet Union conducted such envelopments against the Germans in World War II, in the successive operations following the breakout from Stalingrad. More recently, the Russia-backed separatists used this maneuver in August 2014 to win the battle for Ilovaisk, another important rail hub, over largely volunteer forces. In that instance, the DNR encircled an estimated 600 Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers, including members of the “Donbas” battalion, before ambushing them in an agreed-upon humanitarian corridor.

The hundreds of casualties and POWs that resulted from the defeat drove Kyiv to agree to a ceasefire just three days later. Ukrainian forces at Debaltseve look to be facing a similar fate. Despite reassurances from Kyiv that the “Debaltseve cauldron” remains a separatist-inspired myth, several recent events suggest the separatists are close to trapping thousands of Ukrainian forces in a pocket. On January 21, 2015 Russia announced its intention to withdraw its delegation from the Debaltseve-based Joint Center for Control and Coordination (JCCC), a bilateral forum between Ukrainian and Russian military leaders, citing security concerns.

On January 28, Ukraine moved its civilian checkpoint 50 kilometers northwest out of Debaltseve to the city of Artemivsk, Donetsk Oblast. On January 29, after a week without electricity, heat and water, volunteers began evacuating civilians out of the city in buses. On February 1, the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) in Kyiv said Ukrainian forces had destroyed a “large amount of Russian equipment,” including tanks and artillery systems aiding the separatist maneuver in Debaltseve. The NSDC also reported that Ukraine had “full control” over both the city and the highway to Artemivsk, its last remaining evacuation corridor.

The same day, separatists fired “Grad” multiple rocket launcher systems on the city council building, where civilians were convening for evacuation. These events add evidence to DNR head Aleksandr Zakharchenko’s claim that the separatists have nearly “closed the cauldron” around 8,000 Ukrainian soldiers, despite reassurances from Kyiv. Debaltseve has become the Russian and separatist main effort since the Donetsk airport fell on January 21, 2015. Separatists launched the maneuver in January with the support of tanks and armored vehicles from the east (LNR) and west (DNR). This maneuver was likely planned for months, however, with indirect fire used to soften Ukrainian forces in the surrounding areas.

Ukrainian forces in Debaltseve expressed fears of a “cauldron battle” in September 2014, in the immediate wake of the severe losses at Ilovaisk; an LNR mechanized brigade discussed preparations to encircle the city as early as November 2014. Ukraine’s control of Debaltseve has represented a major hurdle for the creation of a united “Novorossiya” territory from the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR). The two Russia-backed separatist territories declared a union in May 2014 under the name Novorossiya, a term translated literally as “New Russia” which refers to a historical region of the Russian empire.
in modern-day southern Ukraine. Although it remains a stated goal, separatists have openly admitted the failure of the unification. The seizure of Debaltseve would create a direct rail and road connection between the separatist-held provincial capitals, allowing for further political integration and military coordination. While this operational objective has long been surmised, DNR head Aleksandr Zakharchenko confirmed active unification efforts on January 26, 2015. As he described it, the DNR and LNR are trying to create a united front in order to “free up at least a brigade”. This indicates that the separatists are consolidating with the intent to allocate forces for further expansion.

4. MARIUPOL

Mariupol itself faces the prospect of a “cauldron” offensive similar to the maneuver around Debaltseve. As January 2015 attacks by separatists on the contested H20 highway and on Mariupol itself demonstrate, the city is vulnerable from the north and the east to DNR bombardment, penetration, and expansion.

The highway, which runs from the former separatist stronghold of Sloviansk south to Donetsk and Mariupol, is a key operational target for the DNR. The shelling of a civilian bus on January 13 near a Ukrainian checkpoint on the highway served as a high-profile demonstration of this goal. DNR leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko’s recent statement that the DNR will target Sloviansk, a key source of fresh water for the oblast, before seizing Mariupol underscores the scope of Russian ambitions.

The city has largely escaped hostilities since the September 5 ceasefire, but it has long represented a logical next target for Russia. As many observers have pointed out, the Ukrainian government-held city poses a discrete obstacle to a possible land corridor between southwestern Russia and the annexed Crimean peninsula or even Moldova’s pro-Russian breakaway state of Transnistria farther west. Moscow has likely aimed to create a “land bridge” to Crimea since its annexation in March 2014 in order to integrate the peninsula into the Russian security and economic framework. As in Debaltseve, a Russian-backed separatist victory in Mariupol will put Moscow in a stronger position to launch a future offensive along the coastline. Separatist expansion to Mariupol would potentially place Russian forces in a stronger offensive position relative to Ukrainian reinforcements from cities along the Dnieper line, depicted on the graphic above, marking the boundary of Ukrainian core strength.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The ignition of a maneuver phase in the conflict poses new decision points to Russia and Ukraine. By supporting maneuvers on Donetsk, Debaltseve, and Mariupol, Russia has already made its decision to abandon the lines demarcated by the September 2014 ceasefire agreement. As Zakharchenko suggested and the recent DNR offensives confirm, separatist will continue to attack Ukraine-controlled territory “up to the borders of Donetsk Oblast.”48 Accordingly, Russia will face a new decision point if the DNR reaches the provincial boundaries. If it decides in favor of an extended campaign it will likely advance along the Azov Sea coastline toward Crimea, possibly opening a new front from the peninsula. A land corridor between southwestern Russia and Crimea would allow Russia to integrate the
annexed peninsula into its economic and security framework and prepare for a future offensive along the Black Sea littoral or north to the key city of Dnipropetrovsk. Should the LNR capture the remaining territory of Luhansk Oblast, Russia will face a parallel decision point. It could extend the separatist incursion into Kharkiv Oblast, possibly through regular Russian troops from the north, but this scenario is less likely than the extension of Donetsk operations along the Azov coastline. As Ukraine’s biggest city after Kyiv, the capture of Kharkiv would represent a shift from an isolated Russia-backed insurgency to a full-scale irredentist campaign to restore the western boundaries of the Russian empire, which would include the birthplace of Russian civilization, Kyiv.

A continued offensive beyond the confines of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast will remain a distinct possibility, with twopronged incursions into Ukraine’s remaining Azov sea coastline and Kharkiv Oblast as the primary candidates. As in the past, the Kremlin will use the threat of a renewed incursion to apply pressure on President Poroshenko’s government, which will likely face a political crisis if it suffers such heavy losses. In the immediate term, Kyiv will seek to galvanize international support for the ATO and sanctions against Russia. To prevent a separatist advance, Kyiv will seek military assistance from its Western partners, both in the form of training and lethal hardware. It will continue to promote an international effort to isolate the Russian economy to weaken the Kremlin’s capacity to support the separatists.

With the collapse of gas prices, further economic sanctions may threaten the position of Vladimir Putin, whose regime in Moscow owes its success to economic stability. Rather than launching its own offensive, Kyiv will likely continue its strategy of trying to cut Moscow’s fiscal and political capital in an effort to bring Putin to the negotiating table. This strategy will likely continue to fail.

References

[4] Declaration of the NATO summit 2012, point 59: "Missile defense can complement the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence; it cannot substitute for them. This capability is purely defensive."


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