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## Russia's role in the war in Donbass, and the threat to European security

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### ABSTRACT

The Russian annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent war in Donbass, have led to a great deal of speculation about Russia's objectives and their implications for European security. This article examines Russian intentions by means of an analysis both of official rhetoric and of Russia's actions in Donbass. It concludes that far from instigating the rebellion in Donbass and using it to destabilise Ukraine, revise the international order, or seize additional territory, Moscow has largely been reacting to events and trying to gain some control of a process which was originally almost entirely outside of its control. Its primary aim has been to get the Ukrainian government to negotiate directly with the rebels, in order to produce a permanent peace settlement based upon some form of special status for Donbass within Ukraine. It has also used its influence over the rebels in order to persuade them to cooperate with the peace process set up at Minsk. Russia's objectives are very limited, and do not pose a serious threat to European security as a whole.

### KEYWORDS

Russia; Ukraine; Donbass;  
Donetsk People's Republic;  
Lugansk People's Republic

The war in Ukraine has led to an outpouring of literature analysing the intentions of Russia and its president Vladimir Putin. This article examines what those intentions may be and their implications for European security by surveying Russia's actions in the war in Donbass to date. After describing various theories about Russia's goals, the article analyses Russian decision-making processes, and looks both at official discourse and actual Russian deeds. It concludes that rather than deliberately inciting rebellion in Donbass and using it to destabilise Ukraine as part of an effort to reshape the international order, Russia has largely been reacting to events and pursuing limited goals which do not threaten wider European security.

### Views on what Russia wants

Opinions on Russia's objectives in Ukraine vary considerably. At the most alarmist end of the spectrum are analyses which conclude that Russia wants to completely revise the existing international system. Wilson (2014, p. 162), for instance, claims that Putin is pursuing 'a

massive revisionist agenda.’ Lucas (2014) agrees, writing that, ‘Russia is a revisionist power. ... Russia wants to rewrite the rules. ... Russia particularly begrudges the former captive nations of the Soviet empire their freedom, their prosperity, and their independence.’ Rovner (2015) raises the spectre of Russia attacking the Baltic States, saying that Putin ‘might be willing to try the same gambit in the Baltics on the pretext of defending ethnic Russians. ... Putin might opt to use nuclear weapons to preserve his own rule.’ ‘The ultimate strategic prize coveted by Mr. Putin and company is nothing less than the reorganization of European security along new lines,’ writes Blank (2014).

Slightly less extreme thinkers view Russian objectives as being limited to territorial expansion. ‘Russian forces are well positioned to attempt to take control of Transdnestr, Odessa, and Mariupol. It is highly unlikely this conflict will end before this final takeover is attempted,’ says Thomas (2015, p. 447). According to the US Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, Putin ‘wants a whole entity composed of the two oblasts in eastern Ukraine which would include a land bridge to Crimea’ (UA Position, 2015). Binnendijk and Herbst (2015) concur, writing:

One of his [Putin’s] key goals [is] the creation of a land bridge from Russia to Crimea. His long term goal may be the creation of ‘Novorossiia’, or New Russia, which would constitute all of southern Ukraine past Odessa to Moldova.

A more moderate opinion is that Russia wants Donbass to remain within Ukraine but to acquire the status of an autonomous region, so that it can be what Menon and Rumer (2015, p. 86) call a Russian ‘protectorate,’ which will act as ‘a springboard for projecting Russian influence into Ukraine.’ ‘A decentralized Ukraine,’ similarly writes Götz (2015, p. 6), ‘will provide Moscow with the opportunity to nurture a belt of pro-Russian provinces along its border. ... [and] would allow Moscow to block any attempt by the Ukrainian leadership to move the country towards closer ties with NATO.’ This same objective could also be achieved by pursuing so-called ‘Transdnestrianisation,’ in other words by means of a ‘frozen conflict’ in which the rebel regions of Donbass, like Transdnestr, become *de facto* independent. Yekelchuk (2015, p. 145) concludes that Russia is seeking a ‘frozen conflict that would leave the self-proclaimed thorn in Ukraine’s side ... for preventing Ukraine’s potential succession to NATO.’

On the more pro-Russia end of the spectrum, Sakwa (2015, p. 117) denies that Russia is a ‘revisionist’ state. ‘Russia under Putin is a profoundly conservative power and its actions are designed to maintain the status quo,’ writes Sakwa (2015, pp. 206–207), ‘There is little evidence that the annexation of Crimea followed by unrest in the east and south was part of a long-established plan to separate “Novorossiia” from Ukraine.’ Russian analysts overwhelmingly reject the idea that Moscow wants to acquire additional territory in Ukraine. According to *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Kanygin (2014), ‘The Kremlin ... wants to “shove the [rebel] republics back into Ukraine on the condition of some sort of autonomy”.’ Whereas most Western observers believe that the call for autonomy hides a desire to extend Russian influence into Ukraine, various Russian nationalists believe that Moscow’s support for autonomy represents a face-saving way for the Kremlin to sell an impending betrayal of the Donbass rebels to the Russian people. According to this viewpoint, Moscow has always opposed the uprising in Donbass. Russian military commentator Anatolii Nesmian (who uses the penname ‘El-Murid’) writes of the ‘treachery, criminal inaction, and sabotage of pro-Western and pro-Nazi forces in the Kremlin’ (El-Murid, 2014).

Other commentators, however, see Moscow as understanding that only autonomy can bring the war in Donbass to an end. They assess that Russia's objective is to establish a new order in Ukraine which can sustain long-term peace. As Petro (2014a) puts it: 'Russia's primary objective in Ukraine has actually been to reduce the level of domestic instability. ... Russia would very much like to see Ukraine as a stable economic and political partner.' The only way to ensure the stability of Ukraine is to grant the Russian cultural minority equal rights throughout Ukraine,' says Petro (2014b). Similarly, Sushentsov (2015) writes that:

Fundamental mutual economic dependency makes Russia interested in Ukraine's stability. ... Russia genuinely wants the war to stop. ... Russia is insisting on a deep settlement and therefore strives to guarantee the rights of Donbass and other potentially unstable regions of Ukraine in a renewed Ukrainian constitution. ... Moscow's support for the militia in Donbass serves just one purpose – to show Kiev that a military settlement of the conflict is impossible, and to persuade it to sit down at the negotiating table with Donbass.

### Russian decision-making processes

Determining Russian intentions is made difficult by the fact that the Kremlin's decision-making processes are opaque. As Sakwa (2013, p. 27) notes,

Two political systems operate in parallel. On the one hand, there is the system of open public politics, with all of the relevant institutions described in the constitution ... at another level a second para-political world exists based on informal groups, factions, and operating within the framework of the inner court of the presidency.

What happens in this 'inner court' is hidden from view.

There is a tendency to view the Russian state as highly centralised, with all authority resting in President Putin's hands. The war in Donbass is often seen as 'Putin's war' and 'Putin-led' (Thomas, 2015). This implies that there is a single will behind Russia's actions in Ukraine. Sakwa, however, raises another possibility – that there are multiple competing wills, with policy emerging from the interaction of the various factions. As Jensen (2014) says, 'Russia's system of power has not been a strict power vertical ruled only by one person. It has instead been a conglomerate of shifting clans and groups with Putin at the centre.' Also important is public opinion which, while not a decisive factor in policy making, does serve to restrict policy options and can on occasion force the Kremlin's hand.

When it comes to Ukrainian policy, Kremlinologists generally divide Russia's ruling elite into two groups: the 'hawks,' centred on the military and security agencies with some additional outside support; and the 'doves,' which includes those responsible for economic policy and representatives of 'oligarchic' interests. The most notable dove is said to be the presidential advisor on issues relating to Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Ukraine, Vladislav Surkov (Jensen, 2014). Supposedly, the doves consider Russia's most important interest to be a restoration of economic growth, which requires good relations with the West and the removal of sanctions. They are willing to make considerable concessions in order to bring the war in Donbass to an end. The hawks, by contrast, believe that making concessions is pointless, because Ukraine and its Western allies are bent on confrontation with Russia and will not accept any compromise.

According to Jensen (2014), 'Putin has tried to make decisions that balance hardline demands with those of the "corporate" group.' Nevertheless, he believes that, 'The Ukraine crisis has caused a shift in the balance of power within the Russian political

elite. The so-called siloviki, or hardliners, are strongly in the ascendance.’ Others, though, argue the opposite, and claim that Surkov has ‘seized the initiative’ (Dergachev, 2014) and has acquired considerable freedom to pursue his supposed objective of ‘shoving Donbass back into Ukraine’ (Kanygin, 2014). Others still think that ‘There is no “iron plan”, everything is situational’ (Dergachev, 2014).

This article concludes that Kremlin strategy has been rather more consistent than that last statement suggests, but it has been a middle-of-the-road, compromise strategy, designed to satisfy both hawks and doves, rather than a maximalist strategy of either aggression or surrender.

## Official rhetoric

The consistency of Moscow’s intentions can be seen in official statements by senior members of the Russian government, such as President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. From the start of the crisis, the Russian position has been that Donbass is part of Ukraine, but that political stability can only return to Ukraine if the people of Donbass feel secure, an objective which can only be attained by means of direct negotiations between the government in Kiev and the rebels.

Thus in April 2014, Putin (2014a) remarked that

they [the people of Donbass] are citizens of Ukraine, but they should be citizens with equal rights in their country, that’s the entire issue. ... It’s necessary to speak with people, and with their real representatives, with people they trust ... Only through dialogue ... can order be brought to the country.

In order to encourage such a dialogue, Putin unsuccessfully urged the rebels to cancel referendums they had planned for 11 May 2014. However, he also ‘insisted that a presidential election should be preceded by constitutional changes in Ukraine aimed at federalising the country and handing greater powers to the regions’ (Traynor, Walker, Salem, & Lewis, 2014). His mention of the concept of ‘Novorossiya’ in April 2014 gave rise to speculation that Russia was seeking to annex all of south and eastern Ukraine, but Lavrov (2014) denied this. ‘Novorossiya’ was ‘a historical term,’ he said in an interview, adding that, ‘People in Donetsk and Lugansk don’t want to be called “pro-Russian” or “pro-American”, they want to be citizens of Ukraine.’

On 24 June 2014, Putin (2014b) repeated the call for dialogue. He announced his support for the ceasefire called by Poroshenko on 20 June, saying

It is important that this ceasefire open the way to a dialogue between all of the parties to the combat, so as to find solutions that will be acceptable to all sides in order to ensure that people in south-east Ukraine have no doubt that they are an integral part of the country.

Russia’s position has not changed since then. In August 2014, for instance, Putin said that ‘it is necessary to immediately engage in substantive, deep negotiations ... about the state system of south-eastern Ukraine in order to unconditionally guarantee the lawful interests of the people who live there’ (RIA Novosti, 2014). Similarly, in November 2014 he remarked that, ‘For Russia, only one thing is important: that the interests of everyone who lives in Ukraine, including the south east, be observed, so that they can enjoy equal rights’ (Putin, 2014c). Likewise, in February 2015, Putin (2015a) called for ‘constitutional reform, in which the legal rights of the people of Donbass must be respected.’ In May 2015,

Lavrov complained that Kiev was trying to exclude the rebel Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) from talks mandated by the peace agreements signed in Minsk in September 2014 and February 2015 and to limit these talks to Ukraine, Russia, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This, said Lavrov, was 'an absolutely unworkable and provocative scheme' (Samozhnev, 2015). However, Lavrov also emphasised that, 'We are in favour of them [the DPR and LPR] remaining part of Ukraine' (Dolgoplov & Shestakov, 2015).

In September 2015, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mariya Zakharova reiterated this, saying 'Russia, like the whole world, sees no alternative to the Minsk agreements. And in them it is clearly stated that Donetsk and Lugansk are part of Ukraine' (BBC, 2015). In the same month Putin (2015b) said,

the most important thing is to establish direct contact between the authorities in Kiev and in the Donetsk and Lugansk republics, so that the Minsk agreements can be realised. ... Changes in the constitution, and the law about local elections, must be undertaken in agreement with Donbass.

Putin repeated this position in a June 2015 interview with the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* (2015), in which he said:

There needs to be constitutional reform to ensure the autonomous rights of the unrecognised republics. ... this should be done, as the Minsk Agreements read, in coordination with Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic. ... The problem is that the current Kiev authorities don't even want to sit down to talks with them. ... I would like to stress that Russia is interested in and will strive to ensure the full and unconditional implementation of the Minsk Agreements ... the leaders of the self-proclaimed republics have publicly stated that under certain conditions ... they are ready to consider themselves part of the Ukrainian state ... I think this position should be viewed as a sound precondition for the start of substantial negotiations. ... All our actions, including those with the use of force, were aimed not at tearing away this territory from Ukraine but at giving the people living there an opportunity to express their opinion on how they want to live their lives.

Since then, Russian leaders have continued to stress the same points. For instance, after meeting the leaders of Ukraine, France, and Germany in Paris in October 2015, Putin

supported the fulfilment of the Minsk agreements and noted the importance of constitutional reform in Ukraine, but underlined that it was important to agree this with Donetsk and Lugansk. Putin again mentioned the need for direct dialogue between Kiev and the self-proclaimed republics. (Ivzhenko, 2015a)

Similarly, Lavrov remarked that, 'special status ... must be agreed with the separate regions of Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts, that is to say with the current leadership of Donbass' (Ivzhenko, 2015b).

If all this rhetoric is to be believed, then Russia's primary objective has to been to get Kiev to talk to its opponents in Donbass. The extent to which official rhetoric reflects genuine motivations is, of course, disputable, but the consistency of the Russian statements does mean that they need to be taken seriously.

## **Russia's role in the war in Donbass**

The story of Russia's involvement in the war in Donbass can be divided into four periods:

- March–July 2014.
- August–September 2014.
- October 2014–February 2015.
- March 2015–present.

### ***March–July 2014***

From the moment that the uprising in Donbass began in spring 2014, some commentators (e.g. Wilson, 2014, p. 129) claimed that the rebellion was organised not by local Ukrainians but by members of the Russian Army and secret services. However, films taken by Western journalists (e.g. Vice News, 2014a , 2014b) of seizures of government buildings show a very different story, as do accounts by various Western observers (e.g. Gessen, 2014), and accounts by Ukrainian participants (e.g. Regnum Informatsionnoe Agentstvo, 2014). These make it clear that the uprising was, as Kudelia (2014, p. 1) says, ‘primarily a homegrown phenomenon.’ A vast plethora of militias appeared, as separate leaders established power over their own zones of operations. The result was a chaotic situation over which nobody, let alone the Russian government, had any control.

It is true that some Russian citizens participated in the initial uprising, most notably 52 Russians under the command of Igor Strelkov who helped to seize buildings in the towns of Slavyansk and Kramatorsk. Despite allegations that he was acting on behalf of the Russian intelligence services, Strelkov himself claims that he came to Ukraine in response to an appeal from Donbass activists. According to Strelkov, the Russian intelligence services may have been aware of his plans and did nothing to stop him, but he did not carry his actions out under their instructions (Prokhanov & Strelkov, 2014).

Rather than instigate rebellion, Moscow tried to calm matters down. In May 2014, Putin asked that the anti-government forces postpone the referendums they had proposed (Traynor et al., 2014). After the referendums went ahead anyway, and the newly proclaimed DPR and LPR requested that Russia annex them, the Russian government refused (Sakwa, 2015, p. 209). Subsequently, when Ukraine’s newly elected president, Petro Poroshenko, declared a ceasefire in June 2014, Moscow persuaded the then head of the DPR, Aleksandr Borodai, to abide by the ceasefire and participate in the promised peace talks, despite Borodai’s initial refusal to do so.

No worthwhile evidence has ever been produced showing that units of the Russian Army were in Donbass in the early stages of the conflict. The overwhelming majority of rebel fighters have always been Ukrainian citizens. As Mark Franchetti of *The Sunday Times*, who accompanied the rebel Vostok Battalion, reported on Ukrainian television, ‘Most of the people in the self-defence forces are from Donbass and the surrounding area. A small percentage is volunteers from Russia’ (Babiy, 2014).

With time, the complement of these volunteers grew. In August 2014, the leader of the DPR, Aleksandr Zakharchenko, estimated their number as 3000–4000 (TASS, 2014). A report based on materials collected by the murdered Russian politician Boris Nemtsov claimed that, ‘The transfer of Russian “volunteers” onto Ukrainian territory has in part been organised with the direct participation of the Russian authorities’ (Yashin & Shorina, 2015, p. 25), and that, ‘Money to pay the fighters is provided by Russian

foundations, which are funded with the active support of the Russian authorities' (Yashin & Shorina, 2015, p. 26). However, little evidence has been provided to support these allegations. Various private organisations recruited the majority of the volunteers, and those involved tell a different story to that provided by the Nemtsov report. As one volunteer organiser, Vladimir Yefimov, said, 'We get help, for everything except for the salaries, from volunteers and activists. ... [the government] doesn't help at all' (Rupert, 2014). 'The Russian government has hindered us more than anything,' said Yefimov on another occasion (Roth, 2015, p. 23).

In fact, some volunteers hold extremist political views which are sharply at variance with those of the Kremlin. For instance, Strelkov is a monarchist who associated with radical nationalists such as the head of the Russian General Military Union, Igor Ivanov, whom he appointed chief of the DPR Army's Political Department. In a letter to a newspaper in summer 2014, Ivanov (2014) attacked Vladimir Putin, saying 'Putin is not a traitor of national Russia ... he is simply its ancient enemy.' The presence of people like Strelkov and Ivanov in high positions in the rebel leadership was indicative of the lack of control Moscow had over the rebellion in its first few months.

The evidence also suggests that at the early stage of the conflict, the rebel militias supplied themselves almost entirely by capturing weapons and ammunition from the Ukrainian army and security services. While commanding the rebels at Slavyansk, Strelkov regularly complained that he was not receiving support from Russia (e.g. Korrespondent.net, 2014). According to the Nemtsov report, 'the separatists seized 23 tanks, 56 BMPs and BMDs, 26 BTRs [*boevye mashiny pekhoty, boevye mashiny desanta, and brone-transportery*, various types of armoured personnel carriers], 19 SPGs [self-propelled guns], 17 towed guns, 2 AAA [anti-aircraft artillery] pieces from the Ukrainian armed forces' (Yashin & Shorina, 2015, p. 41). Armaments experts Jonathan Ferguson and N.R. Jenzen-Jones carried out a thorough analysis of the weapons used by the rebels and their likely origins for the Australian organisation Armament Research Services. In their November 2014 report, they concluded:

Despite the presence of arms, munitions, and armoured vehicles designed, produced, and allegedly even sourced from Russia, there remains no direct evidence of Russian government complicity in the trafficking of arms into the area. The majority of arms and munitions documented in service with separatist forces have evidently been appropriated from the Ukrainian security forces and their installations within Ukraine. (Ferguson & Jenzen-Jones, 2014, p. 87)

### **August–September 2014**

All of the above suggests that the initial uprising took place largely without Moscow's encouragement or support. From mid-July 2014, the situation changed and Russia began to play a more direct role in the conflict.

It seems likely that from around mid-July 2014, Russian artillery occasionally fired over the border at Ukrainian units south of Donetsk and Lugansk. The most comprehensive analysis of this matter is a report by the 'citizen investigative journalists' website Bellingcat (2015), but its methodology is controversial and far from universally accepted. Perhaps the most convincing evidence of Russian artillery having fired into Ukraine is photographs of an artillery strike on a Ukrainian Army unit at Zelenopole on 11 July 2014. These indicate extremely accurate fire, with the Ukrainian vehicles having been hit directly, but the

surrounding area remaining largely unscathed. This suggests that well-trained soldiers were responsible (1TV, 2014).

From August 2014 onwards, rebel sources began to openly admit that they were receiving military supplies from Russia, through what they called the *'voentorg'* ('military trade' – also the name of Russian Army commissaries). In July and August, the scale of fighting escalated enormously. Even if many of the rebels' weapons were taken from the Ukrainians, they were using far more ammunition than they could possibly have captured. The only plausible explanation is that the ammunition came from Russia.

In July and August 2014, the fighting intensified, and the Ukrainian Army advanced closer to Donetsk and Lugansk. As it did so, it repeatedly shelled those cities, and the humanitarian situation in eastern Ukraine deteriorated substantially. The Russian government came 'under enormous pressure to offer succour to the Donbas insurgents and to stop the killing of civilians' (Sakwa, 2015, p. 167). In this context, it would appear that in early/mid-August the Kremlin made a decision to try to bring the war to an end.

This required two steps to be taken. No peace settlement would work if the rebels did not agree to it, and if the rebel leaders were not able to get their subordinates to abide by the terms of the settlement. That meant that Russia had to rid the rebel leadership of hardliners such as Strelkov and replace them with people more amenable to compromise, and also that Russia had to take steps to centralise authority in the DPR and LPR. Then, as a second step, Russia had to find a way of persuading the Ukrainian government to end its military operations. This required inflicting a serious military defeat on the Ukrainian Army.

This two-pronged strategy went into effect in mid-August 2014. First, after visits to Russia, the political leaders of the DPR and LPR, Aleksandr Borodai and Valerii Bolotov, resigned. Next, Strelkov resigned too, obviously unwillingly and under considerable duress. The exact mechanism by which Strelkov was forced to quit has not been made public, but Strelkov (2015) himself blames Surkov, who he claims 'tried to surrender the [rebel] republics.' The best guess one can make about what happened is that Moscow offered Strelkov a choice: 'If you stay, Russia will not provide the rebellion with any support, but if you leave, support will be forthcoming.' Faced with this, Strelkov had no option but to step down.

With a new rebel leadership in place, Russia now became directly involved in military operations in Donbass. From mid-August 2014, Russian soldiers began posting messages on social media saying that they were in Ukraine. There were also stories of soldiers being buried back home in Russia (for an analysis of which units these soldiers may have come from, see Solopov, 2014). The Ukrainian Army captured ten Russian soldiers, whom the Russian government claimed had crossed the border 'by accident' (Walker, 2014), and after the rebel offensive in late August 2014, pictures emerged of destroyed T-72BM tanks, a variation of the T-72 which only the Russian Army owns (Tsvetkova & Vasovic, 2014). A number of rebel sources have also made oblique references to Russian soldiers, using codewords such as *'otpuskniki'* ('vacationers'), *'rabotniki voentorga'* ('workers of the voentorg') and *'severyane'* ('northerners'), which while not openly admitting that Russians were present in Donbass make it fairly clear that they were (for instance: Prokhanov & Strelkov, 2014; Colonel Cassad, 2014; Shurigin, 2014).

Ukrainian sources (e.g. Butusov, 2014; Rachkevych, 2015) have claimed that 3000–4000 Russian troops entered Ukraine in mid/late-August 2014, although this number cannot be

verified. In alliance with rebel forces, the Russians succeeded in inflicting a serious defeat on the Ukrainian Army around the town of Ilovaïsk, allowing the rebels to recapture a significant amount of lost territory, before on 5 September 2014 a ceasefire came into effect following the first Minsk agreement. This agreement provided for a ceasefire and an exchange of prisoners, and also stipulated that the Ukrainian government should decentralise power by passing a law on special status for parts of Donetsk and Lugansk provinces, and should 'continue an inclusive national dialogue' (OSCE, 2014).

According to the Chief of the General Staff of the Ukrainian Army, General Viktor Muzhenko, 'after 29 August [2014] we had no combat-worthy units from Ilovaïsk as far as Nikolaev and Odessa' (El-Murid, 2015). There was nothing to stop the rebels from continuing their advance. Because of this, the rebel leaders did not want to sign the Minsk agreement; it would appear that they did so only because Moscow insisted. If Russia's intent had been to destabilise Ukraine, seize additional Ukrainian territory or reshape the international order in some fundamental way, its behaviour at this point makes no sense. If any of those had been the objectives, Moscow would have let the rebels keep on going. The only explanation for the Russians' actions is that their objectives were very different – to bring the war to an end, by ensuring that the Ukrainian government agreed to speak to the rebels and provided Donbass with some degree of autonomy.

### **October 2014–February 2015**

The September 2014 Minsk agreement temporarily reduced the scale of violence in Ukraine, but neither side was really committed to making it work. Furthermore, the new rebel leaders installed by Moscow in August did not yet have full control over the disparate militia in the DPR and LPR. As a result, fighting continued and eventually escalated into major battles around Donetsk airport and the town of Debaltsevo.

At this point, Russia appears to have increased the scale of the *voentorg*. Rebel artillery pounded Donetsk airport and Debaltsevo for weeks. According to one report, 'in completing the Debaltsevo operation one separatist battery expended about 150 tons of ammunition a day' (Yashin & Shorina, 2015, p. 40). As the front lines were more or less static until late January 2015, the rebels cannot have captured this amount of ammunition from the Ukrainian Army. It must have been coming from Russia. In late 2014 and early 2015, foreign observers spotted a number of items of military equipment in rebel-held territory which were not believed to have ever been in the inventory of the Ukrainian Army, and which therefore were probably supplied by Russia. These included an Aistyonok mortar locating radar spotted by observers of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, 2015), and a 1RL232 'Leopard' battlefield surveillance radar system (Weiss & Miller, 2014).

Russian troops, by contrast, were rarely seen. In March 2015, the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* published an interview with a Russian soldier who claimed to have been wounded while fighting near Debaltsevo (Kostyuchenko, 2015), and the British journalist Graham Phillips filmed tanks near the same town, which some observers claim were the version T-72B3, which has never been exported from Russia, and so (if the identification is correct, which is disputed) must have belonged to the Russian Army (*The Interpreter*, 2015). But there were very few such sightings, and in January 2015 General Muzhenko told reporters that the Ukrainian Army was not fighting units of the Russian Army, a

statement he later clarified by claiming that Russian units were on Ukrainian soil but in reserve behind the front lines (Zuesse, 2015). Russian soldiers' involvement at this stage of the war was probably limited mostly to activities such as reconnaissance, intelligence, and communications, rather than direct combat.

Meanwhile, Moscow was encouraging a process of state formation in the DPR and LPR, in order to rein in the local warlords who exercised too much independent power. An important part of this process was the holding of votes on 2 November 2014 to elect Aleksandr Zakharchenko and Igor Plotnitskii as heads of the DPR and LPR. The Russian Foreign Ministry gave its support to these elections, saying that Russia 'respects the expression of will of the south-eastern [Ukrainians]' (RT, 2014). Meanwhile, other rebel leaders followed Strelkov's lead and resigned, most notably the commander of the Gorlovka garrison, Igor Bezler and the Cossack leader Nikolai Kozitsyn. It is not clear how these men were persuaded to quit, but it seems likely that some form of Russian pressure was involved. Little by little, the new LPR and DPR authorities gained more control over the disparate rebel forces. As they did, Moscow's ability to influence the rebels increased.

This proved useful when negotiations took place in Minsk in early 2015 on a new peace settlement. The result was the Minsk-2 agreement of 11 February 2015, which among other things stipulated a new ceasefire, and constitutional reform in Ukraine to give 'special status' to 'particular districts of Donetsk and Lugansk provinces', to be 'agreed with representatives of those districts.' By apparently obliging Kiev to negotiate with the rebels and offer some form of autonomy, these clauses satisfied Russian desires. Rebel leaders Zakharchenko and Plotnitskii, by contrast, were not happy. Their forces were advancing, and they wished to continue their military offensive. Consequently, they did not wish to sign the agreement. According to one story, having been summoned to Minsk to do so, they refused. Putin then sent Surkov to see them to persuade them to change their minds. Eventually, the pressure succeeded and the rebel leaders signed. As Putin's spokesman Dmitrii Peskov said, 'There were elements which weren't acceptable to the militiamen ... and, of course, in this situation Putin had to make a great effort to work with them' (TV Rain, 2015). Afterwards, the German Chancellor, Angel Merkel, announced, 'I would like to thank Mr. Putin that he pressured the separatist leaders to sign' (Merkel, 2015). It is clear from this that Russia used its growing influence over the DPR and LPR not to encourage further military offensives, but rather the opposite.

### **March 2015–present**

The Minsk-2 agreement did not bring immediate peace. Fighting continued throughout the spring and summer of 2015, albeit at a much reduced level. Russian military support for the rebels continued during this period. In May 2015, the Ukrainians captured two apparent Russian special forces soldiers near Lugansk (*The Guardian*, 2015), and in July 2015, the Ukrainian Army detained a Russian army major who was delivering supplies to rebel troops and inadvertently drove into Ukrainian-controlled territory (*Newsweek*, 2015). In October 2015, OSCE observers claimed to have spotted a TOS-1 Buratino system in rebel-held territory, the Buratino being a multiple launch rocket system in service only with the Russian Army (Evans, 2015).

Meanwhile, it seems likely that officers of the Russian Army took over many of the senior positions in the rebel armies. During 2015, the rebels consolidated their forces

into a new corps structure, establishing two corps – one in the DPR and one in the LPR. By autumn 2015, almost all the previously independent rebel units had been incorporated into the two corps. According to the Ukrainian government, Russian officers currently hold most of the senior command positions within the corps (Schindler, 2015). The government has not provided any proof of this allegation, but it is credible. Russian military analysts refer to the corps system as a means by which Russia has expanded its control over the rebels, and hints have emerged which apparently confirm that Russian officers play an important role within the corps. For instance, Crimean blogger Boris Rozhin ('Colonel Cassad'), who has proven to be very well informed on events within the rebel republics, refers to 'curators' accompanying the rebel forces. In September 2015, for instance, Rozhin commented that,

Fighting is low intensity, at the most remote parts of the front, where there are no European observers, staff officers and Russian 'curators'... Where there are observers and 'curators' there is no shooting, even in response to the enemy's provocations. (Colonel Cassad, 2015)

If Rozhin is correct, this reveals that the 'curators' have used their influence to make the rebels abide by the ceasefire. Additional evidence for this comes from *Guardian* journalist Walker (2015), who in June 2015 wrote that Surkov had visited Donbass and 'demanded that the rebels fell into line and kept to the ceasefire.'

A number of other events confirmed Russian claims that Moscow wants the February 2015 Minsk agreement to work. In 2014, pro-rebel Ukrainian politicians, led by Oleg Tsarev, had established a 'Novorossiya parliament,' consisting of representatives from across the south and east of Ukraine, with the objective of creating an autonomous 'Novorossiya' throughout that part of the country. In May 2015, Tsarev declared the Novorossiya project 'frozen.' 'It isn't foreseen by the Minsk agreements,' he said, 'and we don't want to be blamed for disrupting them' (Life News, 2015). While the decision was Tsarev's, it seems probable that had the Russian government been supporting the Novorossiya project, he would not have felt it necessary to end it. The freeze strongly suggests that Russia is not interested in creating a so-called 'land bridge' across southern Ukraine to Crimea, but instead prefers to work within the framework agreed at Minsk.

This was demonstrated again in October 2015, when the so-called 'Normandy Four' (Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany) met for talks in Paris. The February 2015 Minsk agreement had stated that, 'a dialogue is to start on modalities of conducting local elections in accordance with the Ukrainian legislation,' and that 'questions related to local elections will be discussed and agreed upon with representatives of particular districts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.' Kiev, however, has consistently refused to negotiate directly with the rebels. Consequently, the required 'dialogue' with 'representatives of particular districts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts' failed to take place in summer and autumn 2015. In light of this, the rebels announced that they would hold local elections under their own laws. In Paris, Vladimir Putin agreed to use his influence over the rebels to persuade them to cancel these elections. Several days later, the DPR and LPR announced that the elections would be postponed till 2016 (Interfax, 2015a, 2015b).

At the Paris meeting, it was agreed that the elections would take place only after Kiev had passed a law giving the rebels amnesty and had negotiated with them 'special status' for Donbass as well as a new electoral law. The Germans and French supported Russia in putting the onus on Ukraine to make concessions to the rebels. As for Russia's intentions,

the episode showed once again that Moscow's preferred solution is for the Donbass to remain within Ukraine with some degree of autonomy, and that it believes that this requires Kiev to talk directly with the rebels. This has been Moscow's consistent position since the start of the crisis, and it remains true at the time of writing in late 2015.

## Conclusion

The narrative above suggests that Russian policy in Donbass has been in line with Moscow's official rhetoric, and has followed a middle line balancing the desires of 'hawks' and 'doves'; on the one hand supporting the rebellion but on the other hand using the leverage which that support has given Moscow over the rebels to push them towards peace on terms which would see Donbass remain within Ukraine, albeit with some 'special status.' Far from instigating the uprising, Russia was at first largely reacting to events, and its actions have been directed towards gaining influence over a process which was initially entirely outside of its control. Contrary to many of the claims outlined at the start of this article, it seems most probable that Moscow does not want, and has never wanted, to annex Donbass, let alone create a 'land bridge' to Crimea. Nor is it seeking to overturn the existing international security system. The evidence would suggest that rather than trying to force Ukraine to grant Donbass autonomy in order to destabilise Ukraine, Russia's pursuit of such autonomy reflects a belief that a stable order can only be restored in Ukraine if the interests of those who opposed the Maidan revolution are taken into account. Russian military intervention in Donbass has been directed not at dismembering Ukraine, but at coercing Kiev to negotiate with the rebels in order to agree on what Sushentsov calls a 'deep settlement.'

What this means is that Russian actions in Donbass do not pose a serious threat to broader European security. The evidence above does not justify claims that, if not stopped in Donbass, Russia will seek to destabilise other countries, such as the Baltic States, let alone that it will try to capture territory there.

What is not clear at the time of writing is what Russia will do if Kiev does not fulfil the promises it made at Minsk and Paris to talk to its opponents and grant meaningful 'special status' to Donbass. Moscow's policy to date has rested on an assumption that Kiev can be forced to make major concessions, not just on paper, but in reality. To date, this has not happened. If the Ukrainian government continues to refuse to concede what Moscow wants, the Kremlin may be forced to reconsider its policy and to accept some form of Transdnistrieanisation. This, however, would represent an acceptance of reality, rather than the intended outcome of deliberate policy.

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