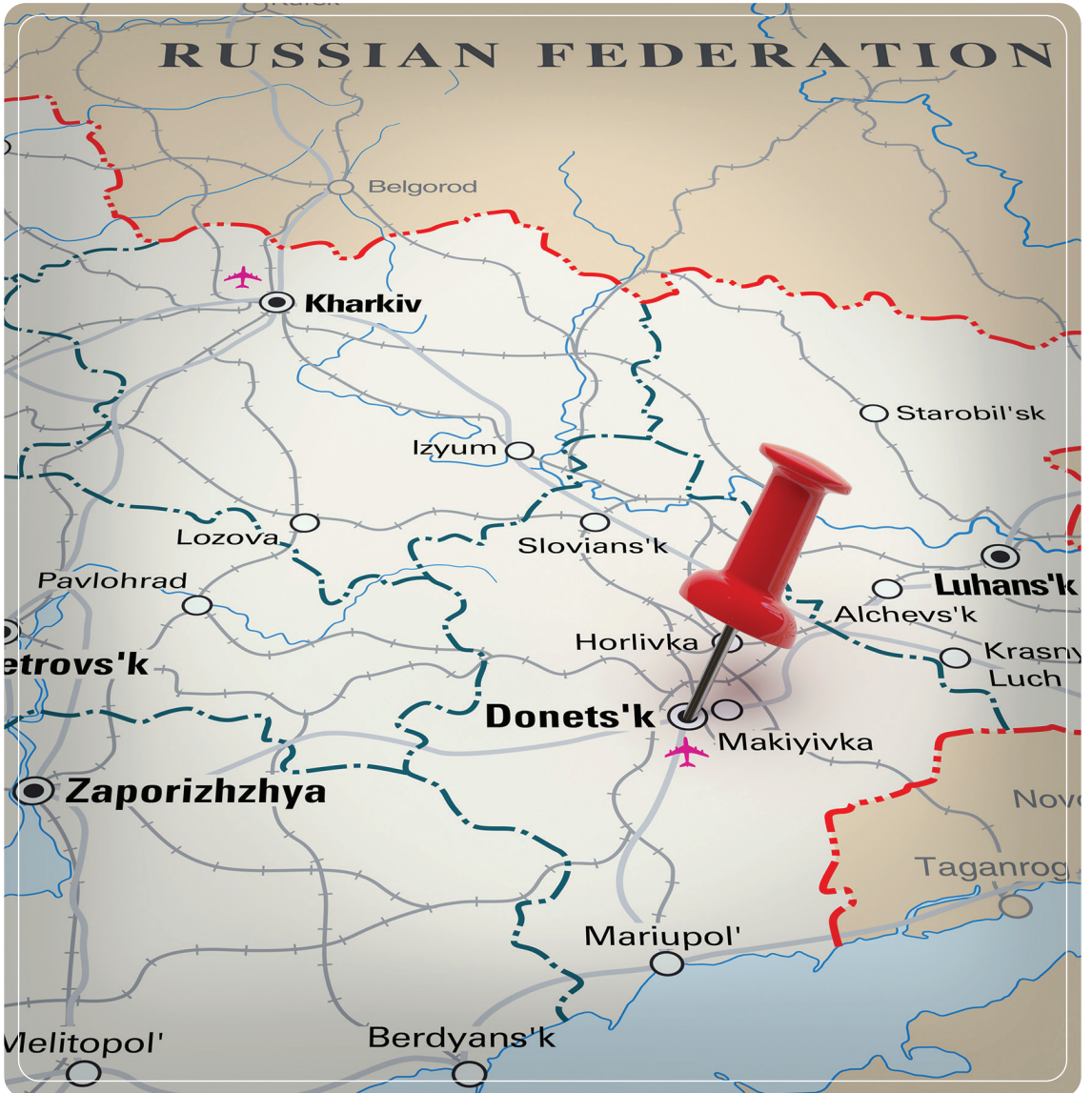


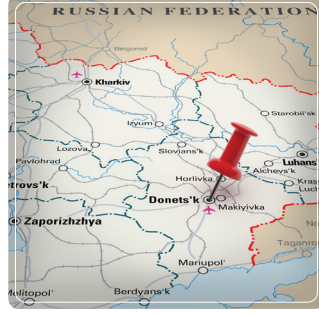
DONBAS CRISIS: GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE, THE DIPLOMATIC PROCESS, AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

MEHMET AĐATAY GÜLER

SETA | ANALYSIS

MAY 2021 NO.73





DONBAS CRISIS: GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE, THE DIPLOMATIC PROCESS, AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

MEHMET ÇAĞATAY GÜLER



COPYRIGHT © 2021 by SETA

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, without permission in writing from the publishers.

SETA Yayınları

ISBN: 978-625-7712-25-5

Layout: Said Demirtaş

Printed in Turkey, İstanbul

by Turkuvaz Haberleşme ve Yayıncılık A.Ş., 2021

SETA | SİYASET, EKONOMİ VE TOPLUM ARAŞTIRMALARI VAKFI

Nenehatun Cd. No: 66 GOP Çankaya 06700 Ankara TÜRKİYE

Tel: +90 312 551 21 00 | Faks: +90 312 551 21 90

www.setav.org | info@setav.org | @setavakfi

SETA | İstanbul

Defterdar Mh. Savaklar Cd. Ayvansaray Kavşağı No: 41-43

Eyüpsultan İstanbul TÜRKİYE

Tel: +90 212 395 11 00 | Faks: +90 212 395 11 11

SETA | Washington D.C.

1025 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 1106

Washington D.C., 20036 USA

Tel: 202-223-9885 | Faks: 202-223-6099

www.setadc.org | info@setadc.org | @setadc

SETA | Berlin

Kronenstraße 1, 10117 Berlin GERMANY

berlin@setav.org

SETA | Brussels

Avenue des Arts 27, 1000 Brussels BELGIUM

Tel: +3226520486

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	7
INTRODUCTION	8
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DONBAS	9
DIPLOMATIC PROCESS: THE MINSK AGREEMENTS AND THE STEIMEIER FORMULA	10
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE REGION	13
CONCLUSION	15

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mehmet Çağatay Güler

Mehmet Çağatay Güler graduated from the Department of International Relations of Hacettepe University. He completed his master's degree in Eurasian studies at the Middle East Technical University. He studied political science at the La Sapienza University of Rome and conducted research for his master's thesis at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH) at the University of Hamburg. Güler continues his doctoral studies at the Department of International Relations, Bilkent University. He is the author of *Building a Nuclear Empire: Nuclear Energy as a Russian Foreign Policy Tool in the Case of Turkey* (Cinius Publishing, 2020). Currently, Güler works as a research assistant at SETA Ankara Directorate of Foreign Policy Studies.

ABSTRACT

This analysis aims to shed light on the Donbas crisis and the reasons behind the recent disquieting developments.

This analysis attempts to explain developments in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine, where a low-intensity armed conflict has been taking place since early 2014. The Kyiv authorities, on the one hand, and the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), on the other, are the two major parties to the conflict. Meanwhile, Russia is perceived as the main supporter of the two unrecognized republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Since March, as a result of increased clashes and arms reinforcements, the developments in the region have attracted the attention of the international community. Both Ukraine and Russia intensified their military mobilization on the borderline. Moreover, the rhetoric of the leaders started to get harsher along with the tension specifically in the Donbas region. Whilst the reasons for such actions and discourse remain puzzling, this study argues that Russian steps were taken mainly in a coercive and preventive manner. The military posture was conducive to the eruption of a direct conflict, but not a full-scale war between the two countries.

This work aims to shed light on the Donbas crisis and the reasons behind the recent disquieting developments. In this regard, this essay starts with a brief background of the Donbas conflict. Following this, it elaborates on the failed diplomatic process of the crisis, which has two major tracks: the Minsk Agreements and the Steinmeier Formula. Finally, the paper scrutinizes the recent developments in the Donbas conflict while trying to yield the reasons behind them.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2021 marks the seventh anniversary of low-intensity military conflict in Donbas,¹ a region located in the eastern part of Ukraine. The conflict started on April 12, 2014, with the occupation of the major administrative buildings in Sloviansk, Donetsk by a detachment of the “people’s militia” led by Igor Strelkov (also known as Igor Girkin).² The conflict turned into armed clashes on April 14 of the same year, when then acting president of Ukraine Alexander Turchinov established several divisions in the Ukrainian Armed Forces to fight with the separatists in the region.³ Henceforth, April 2014 denotes the beginning of the conflict between

the eastern provinces of Ukraine – Donbas - and Kyiv authorities.

The military operation launched by Kyiv is known under the name “Anti-Terrorist Operation” (ATO). The ATO involved all Ukrainian law enforcement entities including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Security Service (SBU), the army, and the National Guard.⁴ The ATO’s operational zone initially foresaw three eastern provinces of the country – namely Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv – with the latter one being excluded from the list in September 2014. According to UN data, up until November 2019, as a result of the armed confrontation, 13,000 people from both sides have died and over 30,000 have been wounded. In addition, 1.3 million people have been forcefully displaced, and over 3.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.⁵

Donbas region, as one of the country’s industrial heartlands, carries a crucial significance for Ukraine. Since 2014, the region has been exposed to Russian hybrid warfare and partially armed clashes. For over six years, a low-intensity conflict has been taking place in Donbas. Yet, it is the recent developments, that is the army reinforcement, clashes, and leaders’ statements, that have put Donbas under the spotlight of the international community.⁶

1 Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts are located in the eastern part of Ukraine.

2 Former commander of pro-Moscow separatists in Donbas.

3 Евгений Сеньшин. “Конфликт в Донбассе Идет Уже Пять Лет. Что Будет Дальше?” *Znak*, 10 April 2019, https://www.znak.com/2019-04-10/konflikt_na_donbasse_idet_uzhe_pyat лет_chno_budet_dalshe (retrieved on March 24, 2021).

4 “Военный Конфликт в Донбассе: Ключевые Даты и Факты.” *BBC News Русская служба*, 14 April 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-39598555> (retrieved on March 25, 2021).

5 “Минские Соглашения. История и Выполнение.” *TACC*, 9 December 2019, <https://tass.ru/info/7297787> (retrieved on March 26, 2021).

6 Conflict (@ConflictTR), “Ukrayna, Donbass’a 90.000 Asker, 450 Tank, 230 BM-21 Grad, 800 topçu, 300 amfibi piyade savaş aracı ve zırlı araçlar, 100’den fazla uçak-İHA takviyesi yaptı.”, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/ConflictTR/status/1374100548832616449?s=20>. For example, the BBC writes, “Ukraine’s army commander Gen Ruslan Khomchak says Russia has deployed 28 battalion tactical groups near Ukraine’s eastern border and in Crimea, which would amount to 20,000-25,000 troops. Russian officials have not confirmed that, nor given any precise figures. According to Gen Khomchak, Russia also has nearly 3,000 officers and military instructors in the rebel units in eastern Ukraine.” “Russian ‘Troop Build-up’ Near Ukraine Alarms Nato”, *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56616778> (retrieved on April 3, 2021).



Source: Ministry of Defense of Ukraine

"Briefing of Col. Andriy Lysenko, Ministry of Defence of Ukraine spokesperson on ATO related issues", MoD of Ukraine, 2 June 2017, [https://www.mil.gov.ua/en/news/2017/06/02/briefing-of-col-andriy-lysenko-ministry-of-defence-of-ukraine-spokesperson-on-ato-related-issues-\(video\)](https://www.mil.gov.ua/en/news/2017/06/02/briefing-of-col-andriy-lysenko-ministry-of-defence-of-ukraine-spokesperson-on-ato-related-issues-(video)) (retrieved on March 27, 2021).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DONBAS

The Donetsk and Luhansk provinces that comprise the Donbas region carry a geopolitical significance for both Ukraine and Russia. Donbas is a coalfield that constitutes 5 percent of Ukrainian territory and extends to the Russian territories to the east. It composes the fourth-largest coalfield in Europe with extractable reserves estimated at around 10 billion tons. The region is inhabited by only 10 percent of the country's popula-

tion and yet, it is responsible for 20 percent of the Ukrainian GDP and makes up a quarter of the country's exports. Hence, it is an industrial heartland. The economic system of the south of Russia has always been deeply integrated with the adjacent provinces of southeastern Ukraine. Thus, the escalation of the crisis has obstructed circulation of goods in the southwest of Russia (Southern Federal Okrug of Russia) adjacent to the aforementioned Ukrainian provinces. For instance, 2014 marked a quadruple decrease in the Southern Federal Okrug's exports to bor-

dering Ukrainian provinces. Furthermore, from 2014 onward, trade between Russia and Ukraine dropped by 75 percent resembling the early 2000s. Consequently, Ukraine's economy has shrunk, with its GDP dropping from \$183 billion in 2013 to \$91 billion in 2015, reaching \$153 billion in 2019.⁷

Even so, the economic significance of Donbas for Russia should not be overlooked. For instance, numerous Russian space- and defense-oriented monopolies rely on the supply of raw materials from the companies in southeastern Ukraine. For instance, the region produces special steel for the tanks of the Russian Armed Forces. Furthermore, the majority of the engines of Russian helicopters are produced in Zaporizhia.⁸

Besides the economic significance of the region, Russia has another reason for its engagement in the region – the geopolitical importance of Donbas.

Besides the economic significance of the region, Russia has another reason for its engagement in the region – the geopolitical importance of Donbas. Russia perceives any sign of Kyiv's inclination towards the EU and NATO as a threat. It is the same for any such tendencies by any other country that Moscow considers under its privileged sphere of influence and/or interests.⁹

7 "Ukraine", World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/ukraine?view=chart> (retrieved on March 27, 2021).

8 "The Significance of the Donbas", *Deutsche Welle*, 15 April 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/the-significance-of-the-donbas/a-17567049> (retrieved on March 28, 2021).

9 Sophia Dimitrakopoulou and Andrew Liaropoulos, "Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020: A Great Power in the Making?", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 4. No. 1, 2010, pp. 35-42; "National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation to 2020", Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Kingdom of Thailand, <https://thailand.mid.ru/en/national-security-strategy-of-the-russian-federation> (retrieved on April 3, 2021).

Since Ukraine has been perceived under such a category - known as the "near abroad" or post-Soviet space - Russia aims to prevent or counterbalance any kind of Western influence. Russia sees itself responsible for "protecting" Russian-speaking populations beyond its borders. And, Donbas despite being a part of Ukraine is mainly populated by Russian speakers; in this regard, demographic engineering has been effective. In short, Russia claims the responsibility of protecting the people living in the region.

DIPLOMATIC PROCESS: THE MINSK AGREEMENTS AND THE STEIMEIER FORMULA

Minsk Agreements

Kyiv recognizes the fragile situation in Donbas. The region was the target of the "Anti-Terrorist Operation" (ATO). Meanwhile, for its imminent neighbor, Russia, these provinces are perceived (even though not recognized) as the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR).¹⁰ The entities declared their independence based on their unilaterally recognized plebiscite results.

With an aim of stabilizing the conflict in southeastern Ukraine, a package of documents known as the Minsk Agreements was introduced. The initial document was adopted between the Ukrainian government and the pro-Russian separatists on September 5, 2014, in Minsk, Belarus. It was a memorandum on a peace plan regarding the conflict in Donbas. Both sides agreed upon nine points including the creation of a buffer zone. Until the ceasefire, ap-

10 Сеньшин. "Конфликт в Донбассе Идет Уже Пять Лет. Что Будет Дальше?"

proximately 3,000 people died as a result of the armed clashes. Moreover, on February 12, 2015, Germany, Russia, France, and Ukraine (i.e., the “Normandy Four”) came up with the set of measures for the implementation of the Minsk Agreement which started to be referred to as the Minsk-2 Agreements.¹¹

Once the Minsk Agreement was concluded, the ceasefire entered into force the next day, on September 5, 2014. Then, on September 20, 2014, the contact group and the representatives of the so-called LPR and DPR - Alexander Zaharchenko and Igor Plotnisky - concluded a memorandum on the implementation of the ceasefire.¹² The contact group for the peaceful settlement of the crisis in eastern Ukraine had been formed in the summer of 2014 and included Ukraine, Russia, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the representatives of the unrecognized DPR and LPR.

The Minsk-2 initiative, a 13-point document that was backed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), made it binding and its fulfillment became obligatory for the resolution of the conflict.¹³ Among the conditions envisaged by Minsk-2 was a withdrawal of heavy weapons from the contact line, aimed at creating a 50-kilometer-wide safe zone, while the OSCE was authorized to monitor this process. Furthermore, there was consensus on the exchange of prisoners. In addition, it contained amendments - prescribed by the Minsk-2 Agreements - to the constitution of Ukraine aimed at giving special status to the provinces of Donetsk and

Luhansk.¹⁴ Overall, the Minsk-2 Agreements envisage the following measures:¹⁵

1. An immediate and comprehensive ceasefire in Donbas starting on February 15, 2015.
2. Withdrawal of heavy weapons from both sides for the creation of a security zone of a minimum width of 50 km.
3. Ensure effective monitoring and verification of the ceasefire regime and the withdrawal of heavy weapons by the OSCE.
4. The launch of a dialogue on local elections in Donetsk and Luhansk in line with the laws of Ukraine.
5. The granting of pardons and amnesty to persons involved in events in certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk.
6. The release and exchange of hostages on both sides.
7. The assurance of access, delivery, storage, and distribution of humanitarian assistance to those in need.
8. The resumption of socioeconomic ties between Kyiv and Donetsk and Luhansk including pensions and all other payments. Moreover, Kyiv shall reestablish control of the banking system in Donbas.
9. The government of Ukraine shall reinstate full control over the state border after local elections take place in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The process of reinstatement of control over the state border shall finish after the comprehensive political settlement is finalized.

11 “Минские Соглашения. История и Выполнение.” ТАСС, 9 December 2019, <https://tass.ru/info/7297787> (retrieved on March 30, 2021).

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements”, United Nations Peacemaker, 12 February 2015, <https://peacemaker.un.org/ukraine-minsk-implementation15> (retrieved on March 31, 2021).

15 Ibid.

10. The disarmament of all illegal armed formations and the withdrawal of all foreign armed formations, military equipment, and mercenaries under the auspices of the OSCE.
11. The launch of a constitutional reform in Ukraine with a new constitution entering into force by the end of 2015.
12. The questions regarding local elections in Donetsk and Luhansk will be raised within the legal framework of the Ukrainian law “On interim local self-government order in certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.” and agreed upon in the framework of Trilateral Contact Group. Elections will be held in accordance with relevant OSCE standards and monitored by OSCE.
13. The intensification of the work of the Trilateral Contact Group, especially for the purpose of the implementation of the Minsk Agreements.

Steimeier Formula

The Steinmeier Formula is another set of measures undertaken with an aim to regulate the confrontation between the unrecognized DPR and LPR, and Kyiv authorities. It also intends to ensure the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. The formula was initiated in 2015 by Germany’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier and introduced a special procedure that would simplify the process for the law on the special status of Donbas. The formula suggested granting a temporary special status for the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk until the local elections take place. Following the OSCE report’s confirming the legitimacy of the outcome of the

elections, the special status would be consolidated and Ukraine would regain the control of these territories.

Initially, the suggestion was warmly received by all the leaders of the Normandy Four; however, its implementation was suspended due to the failure to hold elections in the region. Later, on October 1, 2019, the formula was signed by all the delegations of the Trilateral Contact Group, including Kyiv. Yet, according to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the elections in those provinces can only be held once Kyiv has full control of the region.¹⁶

Overall, the major conditions brought by the Minsk Agreements and the Steinmeier Formula have not been met, while the two sides involved blame each other for the stalemate and underdelivery of the terms. The “special status” prescribed by Minsk-2 requires a more rigorous explanation. To elaborate, according to Leonid Kravchuk, the representative of Kyiv in the contact group on Donbas, whether the “special status” for Donbas envisages Ukraine’s federalization or something on a much lower scale is open to interpretation.¹⁷ According to Kravchuk, such a status should suggest only vaster economic and social freedoms.

Today, Kyiv approaches the implementation of the Minsk Agreements with suspicion emphasizing their ambiguous nature. Hence, Zelensky articulates and reiterates the need for a detailed deciphering of each clause in order to identify whether it can be fulfilled or not.¹⁸

¹⁶ “Минские Соглашения. История и Выполнение.” ТАСС.

¹⁷ Фадеев, Иван, Игорь. “Кравчук Заявил о Подготовке Предложений По Системе Управления Донбассом.”, *РИА Новости*, 3 August 2020. <https://ria.ru/20200803/1575298964.html> (retrieved on March 31 2021).

¹⁸ “Условия Перемирия На Донбассе Утвердит Нормандская Четверка,” *Корреспондент*, 23 July 2020, <https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/4255517-uslovyia-peremyryia-na-donbasse-utverdnyt-normandskaia-chetverka> (retrieved on March 31, 2021).

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE REGION

Since the additional ceasefire measures entered into force on July 27, 2020, the OSCE's monitoring mission has recorded 225 violations as is indicated in its report of August 1, 2020.¹⁹ Furthermore, on the first day of the agreed ceasefire, both parties accused each other of violating it and reported artillery shelling and unauthorized drone flights.²⁰ Thus, it would be fair to claim that the most recent attempts to bring "peace" to Donbas lasted only 19 minutes.²¹ Kyiv basically holds Moscow responsible for its support of ongoing armed clashes in its southeastern provinces as a result of Moscow's regular supply of weapons, ammunition, and personnel to Donbas. Most recently, the death of four Ukrainian military personnel in Donbas has signaled the escalation of the conflict.²²

What makes the recent developments and ceasefire violations different than the ongoing pattern is the increasing number of military reinforcements by both sides and the frequency of military exercises, especially held by Russia, since the beginning of 2021 (in Russia's Western and Southern Military Districts). Last month, Russia held a major military exercise on the Ukrainian border.²³ In ad-

dition, the military buildup, which is claimed to be part of such military exercises, has raised additional concern. It is verified that both sides have been reinforcing their military presence on the borders of Donbas. Russia has simultaneously reinforced its presence in Donbas and on the Belarussian border of Ukraine. Overall, including Crimea, Russian military build-up on Ukraine's borders were estimated to exceed 100,000.²⁴ As a response, Ukraine has transferred its army personnel towards the front line in Donbas.

Kyiv basically holds Moscow responsible for its support of ongoing armed clashes in its southeastern provinces as a result of Moscow's regular supply of weapons, ammunition, and personnel to Donbas.

Contrary to Russia's claims, open-source intelligence material proves that some troops deployed to the Ukrainian border belong to the Central and Eastern Military District of the Russian Federation. However, it is not part of their jurisdiction to pursue military exercises in that region. Hence, this confirms that the intentions do not coincide with the discourse. The current posture of the Russian army on the border could lead to a conflict if either side makes an attempt to attack the other - unlike the ongoing clashes between separatists and Ukrainian authorities. Nevertheless, Russia is not prepared, nor does it intend to ignite a large-scale, invasion-type operation. The current stage of the mobilization shows that Russia has been taking precautions and coer-

19 "ОБСЕ Выявила 225 Нарушений Нового Перемирия в Донбассе," *РИА Новости*, 1 August 2020. <https://ria.ru/20200801/1575263255.html> (retrieved on March 31, 2021).

20 "В ДНР Заявили о Взрывах Возле Позиций Украинских Силовиков в Донбассе." *Радио Sputnik*, 1 August 2020, <https://radio-sputnik.ria.ru/20200801/1575263619.html> (retrieved on March 31, 2021).

21 Матвей Шиманов, "Мир в Донбассе Продержался 19 Минут.", *Коммерсантъ*, 28 July 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4433480> (A.D. 31 March 2021).

22 "More Soldiers Killed in Ukraine's Donbas", Warsaw Institute, 27 March 2021, <https://warsawinstitute.org/soldiers-killed-ukraines-donbas/> (retrieved on April 2, 2021).

23 Arda Mevlitoğlu (@orko_8), "Bir başka emare olarak da Rusya'nın Batı ve Güney Askeri Bölge Komutanlıklarının son 2 ayda tatbikat sayı ve sıklığını artırması alınabilir. Geçen ay da Ukrayna sınırında büyük bir tatbikat yaptılar.", Twitter, https://twitter.com/orko_8/status/1373949129651458050; "Южный военный округ", *Министерство обороны Российской Федерации*, <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okrug/south/news.htm> (retrieved on March 31, 2021); "Западный военный округ", *Министерство обороны Российской Федерации*, <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okrug/west/news.htm> (retrieved on March 31, 2021).

24 "Russian Military Build-up near Ukraine Numbers More Than 100,000 Troops, EU Says", Reuters, 20 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-military-build-up-near-ukraine-numbers-more-than-150000-troops-eus-2021-04-19/> (retrieved on April 23, 2021).

cive measures. At the outset, the military posture to conduct a heavier attack has not been formed. Furthermore, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that military buildup near the Ukrainian borders has ended. Field intelligence confirms that Russian troops are redeploying. Lately, we have also seen a change in the discourse of the conflicting parties as well as the discourse of third parties. Lastly, field activities show that Russia has started to establish military bases with the troops located on the Ukrainian border. This is also another indication that Russia is not interested in a large-scale, invasion-oriented war. If the intentions are not a large-scale clash or to start a war for further territorial gains, then what were the reasons behind the harsh rhetoric and recent military mobility on the border?

Field activities show that Russia has started to establish military bases with the troops located on the Ukrainian border.

The reasons are, in fact, manifold. From Ukraine's perspective, the reasons are the following:

- Ukraine's new national security strategy was signed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on March 25, 2021.²⁵ The strategy recognizes the termination of the "temporary occupation of part of Ukrainian territory by Russia" among its primary national security priorities.²⁶ In short, it acknowledges Russia as a threat to national security.

25 "Президент утвердил Стратегию военной безопасности Украины", Президент Украины, 25 March 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/ru/news/prezident-zatverdiv-strategiyu-voyennoyi-bezpeki-ukrayini-67361> (retrieved on April 3, 2021).

26 Ibid.

- The accelerating diplomatic and military steps that have begun to be taken concerning the new security strategy.
- The consolidation of public support.
- The increasing, if not unwavering, support given by the new U.S. administration.
- In order to prevail over the opposition in the Verkhovna Rada.

When it comes to Russia's recent military mobility on Ukraine's borders, the following reasons are discernible:

- Russian authorities regard the possible U.S. presence in Ukraine and the Black Sea as a security threat.
- Zelensky's new strategy document and his pro-Western policies have alarmed Moscow.
- Ukraine's desire and growing efforts to gain full NATO membership. Therefore, a response and a show-off power seemed inevitable in order to counterbalance Western influence in a region that is claimed to be a priority for Russia.
- The idea of establishing a military alliance that brings Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova together, brought up during the meeting of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Ukrainian counterpart Dmitry Kuleba, is again perceived by Russia as a national security threat.²⁷
- The recent steps taken by the Ukrainian government against the pro-Russian

27 "Dmytro Kuleba and Antony Blinken Discuss Cooperation between Ukraine and the United States in Political and Security Fields", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 31 March 2021, <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/dmytro-kuleba-and-antony-blinken-discuss-cooperation-between-ukraine-and-united-states-political-and-security-fields> (retrieved on April 3, 2021).

media and oligarchs (Viktor Medvedchuk) in the region angered the politicians in the Kremlin.

- The desire to utilize the developments in Donbas as a means to consolidate public support in the upcoming parliamentary elections (planned to be held in September).

CONCLUSION

Despite the seven years and ongoing clashes in the field, neither peace nor stability has been achieved in Donbas. The Minsk Agreements and Steinmeier Formula demonstrate how diplomacy has failed to find a solution for the conflict. However, there appears to be no window of opportunity for either side to pursue a military solution despite many may wish or argue otherwise (recently, the use of force may be acknowledged as a way out). Having discussed the reasons behind the recent developments and army reinforcements, these mobilizations look inevitable. Yet, it should be emphasized and reiterated that the current situation shows us that Russia has been taking coercive measures while Ukraine is seeking to prove that it has the capability and intention to liberate its territory. As Dmitri Trenin argues, the fear of a full-scale confrontation has passed, if ever it was on the table, but the threat remains. In other words, the possibility of further conflict in Donbas remains, especially considering the extent of the military presence of both sides on the borderline.

Concerning the domestic and international conjuncture, Ukraine might be caught imagining the existence of a window of opportunity. However, a possible military operation in Donbas could backfire badly. The precedent of Azerbaijan's victory in the Karabakh case following

the Turkish involvement²⁸ does not seem relevant in the Donbas case in terms of the asymmetrical power disadvantage of Ukraine vis-à-vis Russia. Although Ukraine will not be fighting directly against Russia but rather against pro-Russian separatists in the region, Moscow will not tolerate any attempt initiated by Kyiv in Donbas. At that point, due to the geopolitical and identity-oriented interests mentioned above, Russia would directly involve itself in the conflict. Hence, Ukraine would find itself facing both Russia and the separatists in the region.

On the other hand, the growing U.S. support since Joe Biden took office, has restored the confidence that was long lost in Ukraine. Biden's statement giving full support to Ukraine and his special emphasis on Crimea-Donbas during his first telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin are some of the reasons behind this restoration of confidence. However, it is crucial for the safety of both Ukraine and the region that Kyiv accept the lessons of the past and does not face a similar scenario to the one that occurred during the Obama administration in 2014 when it was left alone against Russia. Considering the capacities of the parties and the current circumstances as well as the military presence and asymmetries in troops, it seems very unlikely that Ukraine will win on the front against Russia-backed separatists and Russia itself.

²⁸ "Azerbaijan's victory was possible in large part due to strong Turkish backing, which was a major factor in deterring Russia from direct or indirect intervention in support of Armenia... Turkey's leadership role in drone warfare was confirmed during the recent Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, while Ukraine possesses aerospace expertise that Ankara covets. Ukraine has already acquired a small fleet of state-of-the-art Turkish battle drones, with Kyiv now understandably eager to purchase more. Meanwhile, talks are underway over possible joint production of new models in Ukraine... NATO member Turkey's superior military training and equipment gave Azerbaijan a decisive edge and completely overwhelmed Armenian forces with their Russian training and supplies." Taras Kuzio, "Ukraine Can Learn from Azerbaijan's Recent Victory", Atlantic Council, 17 November 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-can-learn-from-azerbajians-recent-victory/> (retrieved on April 3, 2021).

DONBAS CRISIS: GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE, THE DIPLOMATIC PROCESS, AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

MEHMET AĐATAY GÜLER

SETA | ANALYSIS

This analysis attempts to explain developments in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine, where a low-intensity armed conflict has been taking place since early 2014. The Kyiv authorities, on the one hand, and the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), on the other, are the two major parties to the conflict. Meanwhile, Russia is perceived as the main supporter of the two unrecognized republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Since March, as a result of increased clashes and arms reinforcements, the developments in the region have attracted the attention of the international community. Both Ukraine and Russia intensified their military mobilization on the borderline. Moreover, the rhetoric of the leaders started to get harsher along with the tension specifically in the Donbas region. Whilst the reasons for such actions and discourse remain puzzling, this study argues that Russian steps were taken mainly in a coercive and preventive manner. The military posture was conducive to the eruption of a direct conflict, but not a full-scale war between the two countries.

This work aims to shed light on the Donbas crisis and the reasons behind the recent disquieting developments. In this regard, this essay starts with a brief background of the Donbas conflict. Following this, it elaborates on the failed diplomatic process of the crisis, which has two major tracks: the Minsk Agreements and the Steinmeier Formula. Finally, the paper scrutinizes the recent developments in the Donbas conflict while trying to yield the reasons behind them.

www.setav.org

ANKARA • İSTANBUL • WASHINGTON D.C. • BERLIN • BRUSSELS