

With clashes between eastern Ukrainian rebels and Ukrainian forces escalating in January, John Chisholm concedes the conflict is now a civil war, with the antagonists backed respectively by Russia and the West

# PROXY WAR

The violence East Ukraine shows no signs of abating. Despite efforts at a negotiated ceasefire, agreements on the ground have proven impossible to enforce, mostly because both sides are finding it almost impossible to enforce political agreements at the highest level because the troops are effectively out of control. For the government in Kiev, the presence of nationalist militias will always be a burden as well as a boon, given their practice of operating outside of official command structures and simply striking at the separatists. Meanwhile, the separatists themselves do not seem to have much of a formal command structure at all, and what there is seems ramshackle at best. Trying to get a ceasefire under these conditions seems a futile gesture.

The terms “violence” or “unrest” are really only soft soap descriptions of what is really happening – a civil war. And a civil war which is becoming increasingly bitter. On the one hand, the government in Kiev cannot lose this conflict. A fragile child still, the new government could not survive a blow to its authority that saw large swathes of the country simply fall away. Resigned to the permanent loss of Crimea, a further territorial loss would

be the death knell of the new government and create a massive loss of faith among its supporters, and a probable change of heart among those who are after a quiet life no matter who is in power. It is estimated that at least 5,000 civilians on both sides have been killed since the fighting broke out, and there seems to be no sign of the casualties abating. Most of these civilian deaths can be laid at the door of the government in Kiev. The very nature of the fighting, which involves the government trying to retake rebel-held towns and cities like Donetsk, ensures that this is always going to be the case. That said, when the rebels have gone on the offensive against built up areas, they have been equally indiscriminate in their shelling.

To add to the bitterness, both sides have resorted to militias, fired up by nationalism, ill-disciplined and often uncontrollable. This was seen at close quarters in the Balkans in the 1990s, and it is axiomatic that these troops are the most likely to commit atrocities in circumstances such as Ukraine. For Kiev, an initial reliance on these forces was inevitable, as the army was wholly unreliable. Many regular officers were ethnic Russians and often had sympathies with the separatists. Although few directly deserted, it was recognised that officers from this mould could not be relied upon to prosecute operations with any real vigour.

For the past six months, these individuals have been weeded out and replaced with officers who can be depended on. But in many cases these officers are either new and green or simply inexperienced at that level of command. Added to this are the additional observations that the Ukrainian army has never had to fight, and is equipped for the most part with kit that dates back to the USSR - often 30 years old or more. There was simply not the money to undertake any form of modernisation.



Indeed, in the Crimea it was obvious which were the Russian and Ukrainian forces – the latter looked like Soviet troops from the 1980s, whereas the Russians looked up to date.

So reliance on militias was inevitable. As politically reliable volunteers who wanted to fight, they at least gave Kiev troops they could count on to stand up and do the business. But now? They have evolved into political movements, such as Right Sector, and often intimidating quasi-fascist movements at that. For Kiev, dependent on the West for sheer survival, they are an inevitable embarrassment and they daily hope no one looks too closely at what they are up to on the front line. The inability of regular Ukrainian commanders to effectively control them provides Kiev with a constant jumpiness. One well-publicised massacre is all it will take for support to slide away. But they still need them.

Ukraine's regular forces are in no way competent to prosecute the war to a successful conclusion on its own. On the 15 January, the Ukrainian Parliament conceded that what is termed "partial" conscription had to be re-introduced to provide the much-needed manpower the army lacks, and the first draft was taken 14 days later. How this will impact on the militias is yet to be seen, as they may be reluctant to surrender men to the regular

army – and indeed it may act as a stimulus to militia recruitment if that is seen as an alternative to conscription into the regulars with their rules and regulations. But this recognition has taken six months, and it is part of the awareness that this is going to be a longer and more demanding conflict than was originally thought.

While Kiev starts to realise that it needs to bend every sinew towards victory, the separatists understood this from day one. Apart from the odd mass desertion, their forces were all composed of militia or paramilitary forces, equipped initially with whatever weapons they could take from Ukrainian government sources. Of course, this has been bolstered by well-publicised but intensely denied active Russian support in the shape of both equipment and volunteers – up to 9,000 of the latter, if Kiev is to be believed. The separatists need both, as without them, Kiev would hold all the cards when it came to reinforcements and firepower.

If Moscow had not intervened so decisively, it is hard to see how the separatists could have survived politically or militarily. But with the covert backing of Putin, using the now infamous "Maskirovka" strategy, they have hope that if they fight Kiev to a standstill their opponents will simply be exhausted by the fighting and East Ukraine will become something similar to South Ossetia or even Trans-Dniester – not part of Russia, but a military protectorate and economic offshoot of Russia.

Although there has been a truce since September 2014, more than 1,500 people have since died in fighting. The ceasefire is now pretty much dead, and attempts to resurrect it have been futile. Instead, both sides have resorted to the gun in order to prove their resolve. The opening gambit seems to have been the separatists' attempts to take control of all of Donetsk Airport which has been divided since 5 December, with the separatists in the old terminal building and government forces holding the new terminal building. This struggle led to a week of intense fighting starting on 12 January 2015, with the control tower reduced to wreckage and separatists shelling the new terminal building in an attempt to obliterate the government forces there.

By 14 January, the separatists claimed to have taken the whole airport, and DPR leader Alexander Zakharchenko stated the capture of the airport was the first step toward regaining territory lost to Ukrainian forces during the summer of 2014. Not to be outdone, Kiev ordered a counter-offensive and, on 17-18 January, pushed the

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separatists back towards the city. Then things swung against Kiev, and by the end of January they had been totally expelled from Donetsk Airport. The place is now an unusable mini-Stalingrad, but hugely symbolic.

The airport battle seems to have had several important consequences. The Ukrainian commanders blame their eventual defeat on the arrival of Russian regular troops who shored up the separatists crumbling position, and then organised a successful counter attack against the government's troops. If this is true, the Russians must have realised such a symbolic defeat would have had significant political consequences for the separatists. Moreover, a victory would have given Kiev a much-needed boost. So the presence of Russian forces, even if only engineers and specialists, seems quite likely although OSCE has neither confirmed nor denied their presence.

The next flare up has been at Debaltseve, which was captured from the separatists in July 2014. As the airport battle wound down, on 27 January the separatists launched a second offensive, this time aimed at retaking Debaltseve. The town is surrounded on three sides by separatist territory, and the salient poked like a finger into separatist-held East Ukraine. It was an obvious target, and Ukrainian forces there started digging in during January. Although it boasts a strategic rail junction, the vulnerability of Kiev's position has been such that the town was effectively encircled by separatist forces as their offensive began.

Although assaults on the town itself were repulsed, separatist forces cut road links and captured the village of Vulehirska and cut off the town from government reinforcements. It is alleged some 5,000 Kiev troops are trapped in the town and mass desertions to the separatists have taken place – but these allegations have only appeared in pro-Russian publications and are hotly denied by Kiev. At time of writing, the Debaltseve pocket holds out, but the town has no water or gas and civilians are being evacuated as fast as possible. If the town falls – if Kiev fails to relieve it, or at least cut open an escape route – the blow will be far more serious than Donetsk Airport. But add the two together and it looks very ominous indeed. No matter how brave the troops, wars are not won by brave defeats and evacuations.

But this is also a proxy war. Russian involvement has already been mentioned and Moscow is seen as the hidden hand supporting the separatists. Far beyond just

turning a blind eye to volunteers crossing the border in Ukraine, it is actively encouraging them. In addition, equipment such as armoured personnel carriers, tanks and GRAD rocket launchers have been seen crossing the border. The separatists' ability to undertake sustained artillery bombardments can only be the result of Moscow tacitly supplying them with shells and mortar ammunition, and possibly the hardware too.

The separatist areas are also confident that Moscow will not let them starve or go bankrupt, and are clearly hoping for a situation akin to South Ossetia where Russia provides the economic support and military guarantee for the unofficial independence of the region. Moscow has been severely punished for this, with hefty sanctions damaging an economy already battered by the perilous slump in oil price. Moscow does have large dollar reserves, but its banks and state enterprises do not and Moscow has already had to recapitalise the banks from these dollar reserves. How much pain will Putin's administration take before throwing in the sponge? Another year perhaps, before the cash starts to run seriously low? For Kiev, their strategic situation is healthier than the operational one at the front. Although the economic recovery in the West has been weak, as oil consumers their economies have benefitted from the low cost of oil, and have provided economic support to Ukraine – apparently confident that they can win their war with the resource they have. In the end, Washington and the EU are probably right if they have the political will to stick with a long game and the money to keep bankrolling Kiev.

For the West, it is vital Kiev wins. Ukraine is a fault-line between two philosophies. On the one hand is liberalism, democracy, capitalism and openness. On the other is populist authoritarianism, intolerance and state control. Although Kiev has many faults, these are being swept under the carpet as inconveniences when set against a wider strategic goal. The goal is to prevent president Putin from attaining his aim of restoring the territories of the USSR to some sort of Russian imperial structure – and it should not be forgotten that some states have already bent the knee, including Kiev before 2014. For the Baltic States, now Nato members but with significant Russian minorities, it is critical a line in the sand is drawn, and Ukraine is it. So far, Washington agrees. For how long remains the acid test.

**Proxy warriors: pro-Russia rebels in eastern Ukraine train using Kalashnikov rifles**

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