Playing a Give-Away Game? The Undeclared Russian-Ukrainian War in Donbas.

Tatyana Malyarenko

Introduction

This article is based on my field research in Donbas in spring-summer 2014 and summer 2015, including embedded observation and in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews with the key leaders of pro-Russian rebels, Ukrainian and Russian military officers and experts (subjects are: tactics of low intensity operation, including the military occupation, technologies of destabilisation, individual and group motivation, scenarios of future conflict escalation/de-escalation). Leaving aside, for the moment, the reasons for the undeclared war between the Ukraine and Russia, I trace the escalation of conflict in Donbas with particular focus on the contribution of various parties to the escalation of violence. Although most research focuses on the tactics that Russia uses to orchestrate conflict in eastern Ukraine, I argue that domestic factors and rifts in Ukraine contributed as much to the heightening violence as Russia’s destabilizing efforts. My study is based on the following hypotheses:

1. The conflict between Kyiv and Donbas was artificially designed, escalated and exacerbated by the involvement of an external actor, Russia. For all 25 years that Ukraine has been independent, Donbas has not had disputes with Kyiv (neither ethnic nor religious) serious enough to drive it separate from Ukraine. Russia’s attempts to fuel conflict between Donbas and Kyiv were based on a number of wrong assumptions and miscalculations. As a result, Russia did not achieve its goals in Ukraine. Russia’s mistakes turned Donbas into a ‘white elephant,’ an occupied zone that neither Moscow nor Kyiv can get rid of or integrate.

2. The weakness of the state in Ukraine facilitated the creation and deepening of tensions between Donetsk, Luhansk and Kyiv equally or even more than Russia’s intentional tactics. Ukraine missed chances to settle the conflict with Donbas in its early stages and prevent the Russian invasion. Now, both conflict sides play a ‘zero-sum game’ and increasingly escalate tension.

3. Countries with weak state institutions are particularly vulnerable to a combination of tactics: the creation of internal tensions, managed escalation, and covert military operations for the purpose of political regime change implemented by external actors. To become more resilient, Ukraine needs not only to strengthen its military but also to strengthen its institutions and promote political stability.

Chronology of the Conflict Escalation in Donbas

March-April 2014: ‘Local Protests’
Turning points included the regime change in Kyiv resulting from the Euromaidan revolution, the flight of then President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych to Russia in the end of February 2014 and the annexation of Crimea in mid-March 2014.

The first spontaneous mass protests against the Euromaidan started in Donbas in March 2014. Donbas local elite used protests against the newly appointed Ukrainian government as a bargaining chip for economic and fiscal preferences related to their local businesses. At the same time, major Ukrainian political-economic clans considered the Euromaidan revolution, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas as an opportunity to remove influential Donbas elite from the Ukrainian political arena.

According to the most modest calculations, about 4,000 ex-members of anti-riot police ‘Berkut’ and about 17,000 of ex-police troops joined protesters in Donbas (Khvylya, 2014). After the annexation of Crimea, Russia increased its pressure on Ukraine through diplomatic pressure and military training along the Russia-Ukraine border in order to convince Kyiv to accept annexation and to change the Ukrainian constitution to declare autonomy for eastern Ukrainian provinces. The Geneva agreement, issued on 17 April 2014 (the joint statement by representatives of the European Union, the United States, Ukraine and the Russian Federation), contained the claims and obligations of all parties, which proved unfeasible. In mid-April 2014, the first troops of Russian mercenaries entered Donbas. The Ukrainian government in response resumed its so-called ‘anti-terror operation’ (Decree of the President of Ukraine, ? 405/2014 from 14.04.2014).

April –August 2014: ‘Mercenaries’

Turning points included an unwillingness to implement the Geneva agreement, an invasion by Russian mercenaries into Donbas, and the start of ‘anti-terror operation’.

A group of Russian mercenaries under the command of colonel Igor Girkin (also known as Strelkov) and Russian paramilitaries (also known as ‘Cossacks’) crossed the Russia-Ukraine border and seized power in cities of northern Donbas. Based in the city of Slavyansk, Strelkov assaulted Ukrainian battalions. His troops destroyed the military and civilian infrastructure in nearby cities. They killed a number of local pro-Ukrainian activists and authorities and brought disorder to surrounding territories. In July-August 2014, the Ukrainian government started to dispatch armed forces, including aviation, artillery, and tanks against anti-governmental rebels and Russian mercenaries, dislodging them from the occupied territories. On 11 August 2014, Ukrainian President Poroshenko began the final operation to reclaim Donetsk city from rebels and mercenaries. He planned to end the war in Donbas in the beginning of September 2014. Strelkov announced the evacuation of rebels and Russian mercenaries from Donetsk and Luhansk.

August 2014 –Present: ‘Invasions by Vacationers and Minsk Agreements’

Turning points have included Russia’s invasion by ‘vacationers’.

Finally, the third stage of conflict escalation started with Russia’s invasion by ‘vacationers’ in mid-August 2014. The Russian vacationers crossed the Russia-Ukraine border and defeated the Ukrainian armed forces in several pockets that sought to compel Kyiv to negotiate with representatives of Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic (Minsk-1). A ‘no peace – no war’ situation cemented. Kyiv announced an economic and transport blockade of the occupied territories of Donbas and stopped delivery of public services, including payment of social benefits for the population (Decree of the President of Ukraine ? 875/2014 from 14.11.2014). Nevertheless, the conflicting parties continued low-intensity shelling. As violence continued, on 11 and 12 February 2015, Germany, Ukraine, France and Russia concluded the second agreement (Minsk-2). The agreement was implemented selectively and slowly enough to avoid a return to all-out war but not comprehensively enough to demonstrate either side’s commitment to peaceful conflict resolution in a credible way. Each failed implementation stage clearly
signaled increasingly desperate destabilization efforts.

**Russia’s Gains**

Rebel-controlled Donbas is a territory bordering Russia with a population of 3.0-3.5 million, excluding about 1.4 million of internally displaced persons and about 0.5 million of refugees, economically dependent on both Russia and Ukraine, suffering from serious humanitarian crisis. The rebel armed forces numb about 40,000 troops equipped by tanks and heavy artillery (The Military Balance, 2015). Ukraine itself faces serious problems with decreasing state capacity, economic crisis, and corruption, but Russia’s goal to create Novorossiya on the territory of eight administrative oblasts of Ukraine or to change the regime in Kyiv look as unlikely perspectives. Moreover, Kyiv tries to minimize the influence of both Russia and ‘republics’ on its foreign and domestic policies and domestic markets through economic sanctions and transport and trade blockade of Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk.

The Russian operation in Ukraine got stuck in the middle of its implementation. Now it requires critical rethinking and re-shaping at all levels, starting from priorities and concepts to concrete measures due to mistakes, miscalculations and wrong assumptions that Russia made when it began the war in Donbas. The first is a wrong assumption about the character of local support for possible separation of eastern Ukrainian provinces, including Donbas from Ukraine and wrong interpretation of being ‘pro-Russian’. Sociological research shows that for residents of eastern Ukraine ‘being pro-Russian’ means supporting closer economic and cultural ties with Russia and special status of the Russian language in Ukraine, whereas separatist attitudes have been consistently low in all Ukrainian provinces with the exception of the Crimea. It was a mistake to assume that changes of priorities in the foreign policy of Ukraine after the Euromaidan could mobilize the local elite and population of eastern Ukraine to separation movements and armed conflict with Kyiv. In Donbas, local economic and political elite, middle class, and intelligentsia left Donetsk and Luhansk directly after the declaration of people’s republics (IDPs map, 2014). In order to compensate the flight of elite and professionals from Donbas, Russia increased its presence in all institutions of self-declared republics: Russian advisors coordinate/control all local authorities and functions from police to social security. As a result, the political regime in Donbas lost its indigenous capacity and legitimacy. It became ‘occupational’ for the local population. In order to keep its rule on the occupied territories, the government of self-proclaimed republics limited rights and freedoms of the local population. Fears increased with the establishment of the Ministry of State Security (analogous to the KGB) and the death penalty for crimes without a fair trial system.

In the later stages of conflict escalation, two additional factors shaped the attitudes of the local population toward the governments of ‘republics.’ First, it was decided to place ‘republican’ artillery and tanks inside of Donetsk and Luhansk between civilian infrastructure and homes, attacking the Ukrainian army from there and provoking its fight in response. So-called ‘artillery duels’ led to the destruction of civilian infrastructure and human losses. Second, Russia was unable/unwilling to propose economic plans and perspectives for Donbas. Although it was the second-most economically developed province of Ukraine behind Kyiv before the war, Donbas is gradually becoming degraded with no hopes for the future.

From the point of view of the residents of Donbas, all of the above developments identified the Russia-backed political regime in Donbas as the military occupation, with obvious implications for the future of relations between Moscow and Donbas.

**Ukraine’s Contribution to Conflict Escalation**

State weakness, individual mistakes, miscalculations and wrong assumptions in the assessment of the pre-conflict situation by Ukrainian command, together determined the conflict escalation path in Donbas. As a result, an opportunity to prevent conflict from escalation in its early stages and to anticipate Russian
invasion was lost. The first mistake (frequently missed in other analyses of the Ukrainian conflict) was operational inefficiency — inability or unwillingness of the Ukrainian command to secure the border between Russia and Ukraine and to protect the strategically important capitals of Donetsk and Luhansks provinces from invasion. In fact, since March 2014 the border between Russia and Ukraine has been open for any kind of invasion. One of the Russian mercenaries describes his way to Donbas: ‘The border between Russia and Ukraine looks like a sieve. You may go any direction – nobody asks. The columns with the military equipment are crossing the border during all the day without any camouflage’ (Rosbalt 2014). The Russian mercenary colonel Strelkov admitted his crucial role in the escalation of the conflict: ‘I was a trigger of war in Donbas. If my troops did not cross the Russia-Ukraine border in early April 2014, protest in Donbas would come to its end alike it was in Kharkov or Odesa…From the very beginning we have been fighting seriously…We were the first troops, who started killing Ukrainian troops’ (BBC, November 20, 2014). The Colonel noticed that in April-June 2014 the Ukrainian troops did not want to fight: ‘Ukrainians imitate assaults, but there is no strong wish of fighting’ (Kotich ‘Voennie svodki s Yugo-Zapadnogo Fronta’. Forum-antikvariat.ru. Posted on May 13, 2014). The occupation of Slavyansk and Donetsk by Strelkov’s troops was the most crucial moment of conflict escalation.

A ‘winner-gets-all’ rule among Ukrainian ruling elites also played a role. As soon as winners of the Euromaidan revolution declared their wish to expel all public servants, special forces troops and police troops employed by the previous government and established special programs of ‘de-separatization’ and filtration camps for civilians from Donbas, former members of police and special forces located in eastern Ukraine joined rebel paramilitary battalions in Donbas. Anti-Kyiv attitudes in Donbas increased significantly. Considering the war in Donbas as a chance to remove influential Donbas elite from the political arena of Ukraine, the Ukrainian government neglected the possibility of relying on local communities in Donbas against Russia’s invasion. The inability/unwillingness of the Ukrainian government to establish clear adequate legislation to support decisions and actions of main units (the regular army, special troops, and paramilitaries) as well as to guarantee the rights of the civilian population is a result of both state weakness and the anarchic political culture dominating in Ukraine. First, a hybrid warfare would have required innovative changes in the law on armed conflict, strategy, and tactics, for which the Ukrainian military community was not prepared[iii]. Second, and paradoxically, the Ukrainian government does not want to disrupt economic relations with Russia due to its high dependence on Russian markets and natural gas. Thirdly, and finally, Ukrainian elites, seen by some as undemocratic and corrupt, may try to profit illicitly from the military conflict since the war has increased the share of the shadow economy and increased corruption around both military supplies and smuggling from/to the ‘occupied territories’[iv].

In the later stages of conflict escalation, two additional factors shaped attitudes and relations between Kyiv and Donbas: first, unguided rockets killing civilians in Donetsk and Luhansk (Human Rights Watch, 2014), and second, the decision of the Ukrainian government to establish economic and transport blockades of the occupied territories and stop social payments there (Decree of the President of Ukraine, 14.11.2014). From the point of view of Donbas residents, all of the above legitimized conflict in Donbas as civil war and qualified the political regime in Kyiv as a state-actor waging war against the population, promising to impact the future relations between Kyiv and Donbas.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned from the Ukrainian Crisis

What Ukraine demonstrates is that a country lacking functioning, legitimate institutions that engender loyalty from its civil servants and lacking an inclusive society in which polarization and radicalization can happen easily is very vulnerable to manipulative Russian policies. Russia was able to construct and escalate a civil war between the state and non-state actors in Ukraine. Even if Russia made mistakes and
miscalculated local support, it is very difficult to undo things now and go back to the status ante in Ukraine because of the mistakes that Ukraine made that exacerbated pre-existing social divisions and increased the distrust of Kyiv in Donbas. Russia can now basically sit back and watch Ukraine disintegrate as Kyiv makes a worse mess of things than Russia could have ever hoped for. In Ukraine, systemic factors of state weakness, including collapse of the army and governance, rent-seeking behavior of the ruling elite, lack of the rule of law and anarchic political culture created a favorable environment for the implementation of Russian tactics of destabilization. Although many tactics of destabilization are universal and can bring instability to any country, resilience to destabilization is still critical. This means that the Baltic states are potentially also a bit vulnerable here, especially Estonia and Latvia with their relatively unintegrated Russian-speaking populations. But this vulnerability is balanced by stronger institutions and the security guarantees NATO and EU provide. Nevertheless, any Russian attempts at Donbas-style scenarios need to be robustly rejected both by sending a clear message to Russia and by working more on inclusion/integration within these states – something that Kyiv totally botched, though probably not solely out of incompetence or inability.

References


Decree of the President of Ukraine ‘Pro nevidkladni zakhodi schodo stabilizacii socialno-ekonomichnoi situacii v Donetskiy i Luhanskiy oblastyakh’, ? 875/2014 from 14.11.2014


http://www.rosbalt.ru/piter/2015/02/11/136640.html
End Notes

[i] Leader of self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic in interview which I conducted in the end of July 2014 explained how motivation of rebels evolved along the line of conflict escalation from demands for fiscal autonomy to establishment of de-facto state and separation of Donbas from Ukraine. (The Conversation, 2015)

[ii] A term ‘Russian vacationers’ (in Russian – ‘отпускники’) appeared and became popular after Putin’s explanation of Russian soldiers on the territory of Ukraine as soldiers who spend their vacations there.

[iii] On 14 April 2014 the acting president of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchinov signed a decree authorising the commencement of anti-terror operations (ATO) in eastern Ukraine (Still in force at the time of writing). According to Ukrainian law the ATO is carried out by Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Security Service of Ukraine (Decree of the President of Ukraine ? 405/2014 from 14.04.2014). The armed forces cannot be involved. After the conflict escalated in mid-September 2014 with the failure of the first Minsk agreement, the president of Ukraine Poroshenko isolated the territories defined as ‘temporarily outside of the Ukrainian state’s control’ from other parts of Ukraine and banned any economic relation with them (Decree of the President of Ukraine ? 875/2014 from 14.11.2014). Later on, the Ukrainian parliament appealed to the United Nations (UN), Parliament of the European Union (EU), Council of Europe, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and all national parliaments demanding that they label Russia a state that supports terrorism and terrorist organizations in Ukraine (Resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, ? 129-19 from 27.01.2015). Finally, on 17 March 2015, it issued a resolution on the ‘temporarily occupied territories’. This resolution, nevertheless, does not identify any state as a military occupier and does not clarify relations between Kyiv and the ‘occupied territories’ (Resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine ? 254-19 from 17.03.2015).

[iv] According to SIPRI, almost half of the actual defense expenditures in Ukraine is used for military pensions and lost as a result of corruption. Corruption in the Ukrainian army has increased in the course of the armed conflict. Practices of corruption include the procurement of substandard equipment at inflated prices in return for kickbacks, the selling-off at reduced prices of equipment and land to benefit individual senior officers, and a lack of funding reaching front-line troops, such that conscripts are frequently forced to purchase their own equipment (SIPRI, 2015).
About the Author

Tatyana Malyarenko

Tatyana Malyarenko is the Austrian Marshall Plan Research Fellow at John Hopkins University and a professor at Donetsk State University of Management in Ukraine.


Links:

Copyright © 2016, Small Wars Foundation.

Select uses allowed by Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our Terms of Use. Please help us support the Small Wars Community.