

Remobilization in the Donbas: Wider Implications of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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On November 10, 2020, the month-long conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh reached its apparent conclusion. However, the effects of this short engagement are not over and are being felt well beyond the borders of either country. The Azeri experience of reclaiming territory once considered lost to separatism has strongly resonated in Ukraine, a country that has struggled to contend with its own separatist movements since 2014 when pro-Russian militants established two unrecognized states in the Donbas region.¹

In early 2015, the conflict in Ukraine degenerated into a protracted stalemate along a demarcation line, referred to as the anti-terrorist operation zone. From that point forward, the Donbas War began a transition from a hot conflict into something that increasingly resembles the "frozen conflicts" long considered a trademark of the post-Soviet space. Not unlike the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Donbas War has been well characterized by outside involvement, cease-fires that experience frequent lapses, and, on occasion, the complete collapse of peace talks.² We are now seeing that recent events are threatening to plunge the current "frozen conflict" in Ukraine back into an active "hot conflict." On each side, media and military experts have observed sharp increases in the preparations being made for war, possibly jeopardizing the already fragile truce set in place on July 27, 2020.

It appears that while both sides are preparing for future military engagements, the reasoning behind why they are pursuing these military policies may differ. It is common practice in the separatist-held territories to hold training exercises each year to assess their preparedness for a possible military escalation. In years past, these training exercises have received the participation of approximately 30,000 able-bodied individuals, demonstrating the separatist's capacity to field a sizable force. It should be noted, however, that many participants were individuals brought in against their will. Conscripts are formally registered with the Donbas People's Militia and then assigned to military units to carry out control measures where needed. Yet, the last training exercise where these types of numbers were achieved occurred in 2017. Since then, military analysts have observed that the numbers are steadily decreasing year after year, exposing critical inadequacies in the separatist's ability to deploy a sufficient defensive force if conflict were to reignite.³

There are reasons for this decline in military capacity among the separatist forces. Chief among these reasons is the consistent outflow of individuals leaving for Russia, where there exists more economic opportunity. Outside of military service, few possibilities exist for earning

¹ Pagulic, Roman. (2020).

² Legucka, Agnieszka. (2017)

³ Pagulic, Roman. (2020).

a steady wage in the Donbas. Additionally, with Russia's policy of expediting citizenship for those living in occupied Ukraine, the temptation of leaving is more than many can resist. This past year has seen the worst military exercise turnout since the conflict began, a statistic that came to the immediate attention of separatist leadership. The identification of this resource problem can perhaps explain the separatists' current efforts to engage in the large-scale remobilization we are witnessing.

According to Vadim Skibitsky, a representative of Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate, the structure of the militant forces in the Donbas over the last few years has remained relatively the same. Military hardware, much of it provided by Russia or taken from captured Ukrainian army depots early in the war, has likewise remained the same. These numbers include some 500 tanks, twice as many armored vehicles, and around 1,000 artillery systems. Lack of equipment and hardware is not the primary concern in Donetsk. The chief dilemma facing the separatists is finding ways to fully staff the military hardware they have. Mobilization has become the solution to this problem.⁴

In Donetsk, military-age males have been strongly advised to voluntarily register for military service at local enlistment offices. Over the last month, those men already on record have received text messages from the police requesting they show up by a designated date with the proper documentation. However, this news raises additional concerns. If this information is accurate, it would suggest that Donetsk has been going through the process of remobilizing for a month now, despite only having officially announced this policy last week. Secretly mobilizing amidst an ongoing truce does not lend comfort to Kyiv that Donetsk is negotiating in good faith. According to Sergei Garmash, a journalist who reports on the Donbas, if the separatist government is attempting to hide their mobilization, we can assume that "the purpose of the mobilization is not for propaganda purposes, but as part of a technical strategy - an action in anticipation of a possible violent conflict."⁵

The prospect of this remobilization can have possible political ramifications too. If the separatist government begins general conscription of local populations, the need for foreign-born fighters in the Donbas will decrease, and we will likely see fewer Russian mercenaries. The nature of the conflict would change on a political level. As the conflict currently stands, many political actors approach the War in Donbas not as a civil war but as a military occupation by Russia. The narrative that the War in Donbas is a fight against Russian aggression rather than a domestic issue, promulgated by an outside force, has allowed particular political agendas to persist. For example, throughout the Minsk Dialogue, negotiating parties have insisted on addressing Russia but not the separatists directly, as such an action would be seen as providing legitimacy to their self-rule. By decreasing the presence of Russian fighters in Eastern Ukraine, it would become more difficult to treat the War in Donbas as a military occupation by Russia, thus changing the nature of future peace talks.

⁴ Pagulic, Roman. (2020).

⁵ Ibid

Furthermore, it should be noted that this political flexing is likely also a result of the upcoming mandatory vote to extend the law on the special status for the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk. The bill on the special status for the occupied territories was first proposed in 2014 in order to address certain measures included in the Minsk Protocol. The law, originally intended to be in effect for three years, would ensure de-facto autonomy for the "occupied territories" once all conditions in Article 10 of the law had been met. Principally, this would require the removal of "all illegal armed formations, their military equipment, as well as fighters and mercenaries from the territory of Ukraine."⁶ To this date, however, de-facto autonomy in the occupied territories has not been recognized as the requirements of Article 10 were never met. Because the law on special status expired in 2017, it has become procedural for the Ukrainian parliament to vote on the extension of the bill each December — a process that has now been repeated for three consecutive years.⁷ With the Donbas region's status in question each December, escalation has become a routine tool intended to exert pressure on the Ukrainian parliament to grant de-facto autonomy to the occupied territories. It is, therefore, not only in the military interests of Donetsk to pursue such a policy of rearmament but also within their political interests too.

In addition to remobilization, we are also seeing an increase in the intensity of fighting along the demarcation line over the last few weeks. After the cease-fire began this past July, fighting along the front cooled, but only to a certain extent. Ruslan Khomchak, the Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, confirmed this reality when he reported on Ukrainian casualties during the first 120 days of the truce. Since late July, four Ukrainian soldiers have been killed and fourteen injured in combat, with the last incident resulting from enemy sniper fire on November 24. Though perhaps not the numbers that would indicate intensive combat, these statistics would by no means lead observers to assume the situation on the front is stable or that peace is just around the corner. Media reporting from the front line has only served to confirm the narrative that the cease-fire exists in name only. Several Ukrainian positions in and around the separatist-held city of Horlivka have experienced heavy sniper and artillery bombardment over the last couple of weeks alone. As one Ukrainian soldier explained: "Some days, the war has begun anew. It is easy to forget there is even a cease-fire when their artillery begins bombarding our positions."⁸

Moreover, these attacks do not seem to be slowing down but increasing in intensity. The rate at which separatist forces have fired on Ukrainian held positions near Horlivka has steadily progressed from sporadic small provocations (a common occurrence along the anti-terrorist operation zone) to consistent, intensive fire, employing higher grades of weapons. Hostile operations undertaken recently by separatist forces have not been limited to these small combat engagements only. The same Ukrainian servicemen who experienced enemy bombardment near Horlivka have also reported efforts to expand and reinforce militant positions in the area. Since July, militant forces have begun the construction of three new forward positions while improving the positions they already control.

⁶ Zoria, Yuri. (2019).

⁷ 112-Ukraine. (2020).

⁸ Pagulic, Roman. (2020).

Amidst the remobilization in Donetsk, Ukraine is likewise not sitting idle but also taking actions that have caused concern for those who follow the war closely. The most recent experiences from Nagorno-Karabakh have given the Ukrainian military a great deal to analyze and study. It was not sheer numbers and overwhelming odds that allowed Azerbaijan to achieve victory against combatants who had had three decades to dig in. Instead, Azerbaijan successfully employed new technology and strategies in ways that had previously not been considered.

In an effort to improve military effectiveness, the armed forces of Ukraine are attempting to replicate the same results they observed in Azerbaijan during training exercises held in the South of Ukraine. Specifically, the exercises aim to study how to use modern military hardware during offensive maneuvers. Perhaps most importantly is the implementation of drones as reconnaissance tools for small infantry units attacking key targets within enemy-held territory.⁹

Through these military exercises, Ukraine is both preparing for a future engagement in the Donbas and sending a powerful political message that they are ready to do so should negotiations fail. Overall, it is impossible to directly translate the Karabakh experience to Ukraine's situation in the Donbas. For starters, Ukraine does not have the same amount of resources and cannot spend nearly as much as Azerbaijan, whose oil-rich economy and partnership with Turkey has given them substantial access to resources not available to Ukraine.¹⁰ Simultaneously, the separatist forces in Ukraine still maintain support from Russia, both in fighting personnel and, most notably, in economic and technological support. So long as this remains constant, the separatist forces in the Donbas will hardly resemble the ill-equipped Armenian army that faced so many shortcomings in Nagorno-Karabakh.

It is unlikely that we will see Ukraine reconquer the Donbas in a similar fashion to how Azerbaijan blitzed the Armenians in Karabakh, but we very well might be witness to another breakdown in peace talks should these escalations continue. President Zelensky campaigned heavily on a platform of pursuing de-escalation in the Donbas War and achieving a lasting compromise that would see the Donbas region reintegrated into Ukraine with little to no violence. It is a worthy goal, and one which some might argue was making small increments of progress - the July cease-fire denoting a prime example. Ukraine is at a crossroads. How Ukraine's political actors choose to move forward on this escalation crisis will profoundly affect the future of peace talks in the years to come.

⁹ Donbas Realities. (2020).

¹⁰ Cornell, Svante. (2020).

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