

## With “butcher of Syria” in charge, Russia shifts focus to Donbas



**President Vladimir Putin and Gen. Aleksandr Dvornikov  
after latter awarded ‘Hero of the Russian Federation’ for service in Syria, 2016**

On Feb. 21, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed executive orders formally recognizing the independence of the “People’s Republics” created by pro-Russian separatists in portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine in 2014. He also signed treaties of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance with both “republics” and, after doing so, deployed additional troops to those areas. Three days later, he announced a “special military operation” in eastern Ukraine to protect the people who “have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime.” The “special military operation” was in fact a full-fledged, multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine from Belarus in the north, Crimea in the south and Russian territory adjacent to eastern and northeastern Ukraine, accompanied by intensive attacks by artillery and missiles on many cities throughout the country. Over the past seven weeks, Russia attacked Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson, Dnipro, Mariupol, Odesa and other cities – most recently, Lviv – with artillery and missiles, in the process destroying apartment buildings, schools, hospitals and shelters, and killing and injuring many thousands of men, women and children. The UN estimates that more than 7 million Ukrainians have been displaced from their homes, and as of yesterday 5 million have fled to neighboring countries. The attacks on the cities, all of which, targeting civilians, constituted war crimes, were accompanied by untold numbers of atrocities committed by Russian troops on the ground in Bucha and other cities and towns.

Yet despite all the attacks on the cities and all the atrocities committed on the ground, the Russian forces were unable to overcome the fierce defense mobilized by the Ukrainian military and its citizens in the Kyiv region and, with the offensive stalled around Kyiv, on Mar. 25 Russia announced a fundamental shift in the focus of its “special military operation.” In a briefing on the first four weeks of the “operation,” Col. Gen. Sergey Rudskoy, the first deputy chief of Russia’s General Staff of the Armed Forces and head of its Main Operational Directorate, said, “In general, the main objectives of the first stage of the operation have been accomplished. The combat potential of the armed forces of Ukraine has been considerably reduced, which...makes

it possible to focus our core efforts on achieving the main goal, the liberation of Donbass....The public and individual experts are wondering what we are doing in the area of the blockaded Ukrainian cities. These actions are carried out with the aim of causing such damage to military infrastructure, equipment, personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the results of which allow us not only to tie down their forces and prevent them from strengthening their grouping in the Donbass, but also will not allow them to do this until the Russian army completely liberates the territories of the Donetsk People Republic and Luhansk Peoples Republic.”

The first step in that “liberation” occurred on Apr. 8 with a missile attack on the train station in Kramatorsk in the Donetsk region that was crowded with several thousand civilians hoping to leave before the “liberation” began. The missile attack on the crowd at the train station was not surprising; the week before, Army Gen. Aleksandr Dvornikov, the commander of the Southern Military District, which is headquartered in Rostov and adjacent to the Donetsk region and the nearly-obliterated city of Mariupol, was placed in charge of the “special military operation” to “liberate” the Donbas. Dvornikov is widely-known (outside Russia) as “the butcher of Syria” for what the forces under his command did there in 2015-16. Mariupol, which before the war was, with more than 400,000, the second largest city in the Donetsk region and the tenth-largest in the country, is this war’s Aleppo. Yesterday, after re-supplying and re-deploying the Russian forces, Dvornikov opened a 300-mile front throughout the Donbas region and began what may well be the decisive battle of the “special military operation” – one Putin has pledged to complete by May 9, Victory Day.

Meanwhile, the peace talks, which began in late February a few days after the invasion and have continued intermittently since then both in-person and by video conference, are stalled, largely over disagreements about the future status of Crimea, the Donbas and the “land bridge” that, after Russia takes Mariupol, will connect it with Crimea. Immediately after Russia launched the invasion, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and others spoke with Putin and urged Russia to begin discussions with Ukraine that might lead to a ceasefire. On Feb. 28, representatives of the two governments – the Russian team led by former minister of culture and presidential adviser Vladimir Medinsky, the Ukrainian team by Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov – met for almost five hours in Gomel, Belarus. In a statement issued after the talks, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s office said, “their main goal was to discuss a ceasefire and the end of combat actions on the territory of Ukraine. The parties have determined the topics where certain decisions were mapped out. In order for these decisions to be implemented as a roadmap, the parties are returning for consultations to their capitals. The parties discussed holding another round of negotiations where these decisions can develop.”

On Mar. 3, the Russian and Ukrainian representatives met again in Belovezhskaya Pushcha near Brest in Belarus. They agreed in principle on the need for “humanitarian corridors” that would be protected by temporary ceasefire agreements to allow civilians to flee from the cities under attack. According to Medinsky, “The Ministries of Defense of Russia and Ukraine have agreed on the format of maintaining humanitarian corridors for the exit of the population, and on the possible temporary ceasefire in the humanitarian corridor area for the period of the release of the civilian population. I think this is a significant progress.” After the meeting, Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podoliak said, “The second round of talks is over. Unfortunately, Ukraine does not have the results it needs yet. There are decisions only on the organization of humanitarian corridors. The only thing I can say is that we discussed the humanitarian aspect in

sufficient detail, because quite a lot of cities are now surrounded. There is a dramatic situation with medicines, food, and evacuation.”

On Mar. 7, the third round of talks took place in the Brest region of Belarus, close to the Ukrainian border, after which Podoliak said “We have achieved some small positive results concerning the logistics of humanitarian corridors.” Medinsky said he expected the corridors, slightly adjusted to reflect the changing situation on the ground, would soon start functioning and the Russian ministry of defense announced later it would cease fire in the vicinity of corridors providing safe passage out of Kyiv, Kharkiv and Mariupol. But Ukraine said the designated corridors were unacceptable since, in most cases, they went to Belarus or Russia. The talks continued subsequently via videoconference.

On Mar. 10, after Erdoğan spoke again with Putin, the first high-level meeting took place between Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of a diplomatic forum in Antalya, Turkey. In the meeting, facilitated by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the ministers discussed the situation in Ukraine for an hour and a half. After the meeting, Kuleba tweeted, “I insisted on the urgent need to allow humanitarian help for Mariupol and a 24-hour ceasefire. Unfortunately, FM Lavrov seemed to have come to talk, not to decide. I hope he will convey Ukraine’s requests back in Moscow....The broad narrative he conveyed to me is that they will continue their aggression until Ukraine meets their demands, and the least of these demands is surrender.” He said Ukraine was open to “diplomatic solutions” but it couldn’t “stop the war if the aggressor country does not want to do so.” Lavrov for his part, after noting there had been some progress made in the three meetings of Ukrainian and Russian representatives, said Russia had presented Ukraine with its proposals to end the conflict and was prepared to continue discussions. But he also said, “We will define Ukraine’s destiny by ourselves.” In a press conference after the meeting, Çavuşoğlu said it was a first step toward ending the war, but only a first step: “There is no point in expecting miracles from this meeting....There were no expectations, including from myself, that all the demands would be taken into consideration.” Nevertheless, he said, “the contacts on this level have begun. These were the first negotiations on the ministerial level.” He said he hoped contacts “between the parties will continue along with measures to increase mutual trust and eventually this will lead to a result. As we have already said, there is no other option.”

The negotiations between the Russian and Ukrainian teams continued via video conference and on Mar. 14, with Çavuşoğlu mediating, they discussed for the first time the contours of a possible peace agreement. While the earlier meetings had been concerned largely with the issues resulting from Russia’s sustained attack on the cities – in particular, creating the humanitarian corridors that would enable residents to leave the cities under attack – the draft addressed for the first time the issues that had prompted the war in the first place – Russia’s insistence that Ukraine not join NATO, not provide forward bases for NATO forces and offensive weapons, and accept Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk “republics” in eastern Ukraine. Ukraine had already acknowledged, in a number of statements by Zelenskyy, that it was prepared to abandon its aspiration, embedded in its constitution, to become a member of NATO and would accept, instead, an international status as a non-aligned neutral state. It had also indicated it would be willing to prohibit other states from having bases and deploying troops and offensive weapons in the country, would accept a reduction in the size of its military, and would be willing to accept Russian as an official language in the predominantly Russian-speaking areas of the Donbas. But it insisted that, as a neutral and

militarily non-aligned state, its security be guaranteed by other states. And it refused to recognize Crimea as part of the Russian Federation, the independence of the Donbas “republics,” and a Russian “land bridge” to Crimea.

On Mar. 27, two days after the Russian defense ministry announced its shift in focus to the “liberation” of the Donbas, Erdoğan spoke again with Putin and urged him to agree to a ceasefire and, toward that end, resume the peace talks that, after the three meetings in Belarus, had continued via videoconference. He offered to host the talks and Putin accepted the offer. Two days later, the Russian team, headed by Medinsky, and the Ukrainian team, now headed by David Arakhamia, the leader in the Rada of the deputies of Servant of the People, the party founded by Zelenskyy and named after the television show that made him famous, met for three hours at the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul, during which they exchanged written proposals on the key issues. After the meeting, Podoliak said “The Russian delegation is constructive. This doesn’t mean that the negotiations are easy. They are difficult.” Medinsky likewise said the talks had been “constructive:” “We have received proposals from Ukraine to consider their clearly formulated position on inclusion in the treaty.” Ukraine, he said, had presented proposals that “for the first time showed readiness to fulfill a whole range of the most important conditions” demanded by Russia – in particular, a willingness to give up its ambition to join NATO, accept an international status of neutrality, prohibit other states or alliances from having military bases and stationing troops in Ukraine, and commit to not obtaining or developing nuclear weapons. But he noted that, in exchange for accepting an international status of neutrality and military non-alignment, Ukraine insisted that its security be unconditionally guaranteed by several states in a treaty that would provide an “enhanced analogue” of Article 5 of the NATO treaty that would legally oblige each of them to protect Ukraine from any aggression. (Among the prospective guarantor states Ukraine had in mind are the U.S., the UK, Turkey, France, Germany, Poland and Israel, although none had as yet agreed to assume the responsibility of guaranteeing Ukraine’s security.) Ukraine proposed that the issue of Crimea be addressed by non-military means – i.e., by political and diplomatic negotiation between the two countries – within 15 years. And it proposed that the status of the territories that now comprise the “people’s republics” be decided by the two presidents. It also proposed that Russia withdraw its objection to Ukraine becoming a member of the EU.

On Mar. 29, before the talks began, Russian Minister of Defense Army General Sergey Shoigu, who had not been seen publicly for some time and was reported to be ill, issued a statement reiterating what Col.-Gen. Rudskoy had said several days earlier: “First, regarding the course of the special military operation of the Russian Armed Forces on the territory of Ukraine. In general, the main goals of the first stage of the Russian Federation’s special operation have been completed. The combat potential of the Ukrainian Armed Forces has been significantly reduced, which makes it possible to focus the main attention and main efforts on achieving the main goal – the liberation of Donbass. The Russian armed forces will continue the special military operation until the goals set are achieved.” And after the talks concluded that day, Deputy Defense Minister Col.-Gen. Alexander Fomin signaled a reduction of Russian military activity in and around Kyiv that was at least partly attributable to the progress made in the peace talks: “Due to the fact that the talks on preparing an agreement on Ukraine’s neutrality and non-nuclear status as well as on providing Ukraine with security guarantees are moving to the practical sphere, considering the principles discussed during the meeting today, in order to bolster mutual

confidence and create the necessary conditions for the further talks and the achievement of the final goal - the coordination and the signing of the aforementioned agreement – the Russian Defense Ministry has made a decision to cardinally, several-fold decrease the military activity in the direction of Kiev and Chernigov. We are proceeding from the premise that Kiev will make corresponding basic decisions and conditions should be created for the further normal work,"

The talks resumed on Apr. 1 by video and continued discussion of the framework of a possible peace agreement Ukraine had presented in Istanbul. Çavuşoğlu, who continued to mediate the discussion, said he hoped that, with sufficient agreement, it might be possible for Kuleba and Lavrov to meet again within a week or two. Also on Apr. 1, Erdoğan spoke again with Putin and, in light of what he described as “positive and constructive” talks in Istanbul, suggested that Putin and Zelenskyy meet to deal with the issues involving Crimea and the Donbas and offered to host such a meeting. And the next day, there were signs that the two sides were getting closer to an agreement; Arakhamia, the head of Ukraine’s negotiating team, said Russia had accepted the idea of Ukraine’s security being guaranteed by several states. And although the two sides continued to disagree about Crimea, he said the Russian team had agreed that the framework of a possible agreement was sufficiently developed to warrant talks between the two leaders. Nevertheless, several days later, Lavrov objected to Ukraine’s proposal that, if and when an agreement were reached on the security guarantees, it would conduct a referendum on its commitment to neutrality and the security guarantees – but only *after* there had been a ceasefire and the Russian troops had withdrawn. He said “There is a big probability that when this referendum gives a negative answer, the negotiating process will have to be started anew. We don’t want to play such cat-and-mouse games. Let me stress once again: we don’t want the fate of the Minsk agreements repeated and we can’t allow it.” [The Minsk agreements involved a ceasefire between Russian and Ukrainian forces in the Donbas agreed by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany in Sept. 2014 and a second ceasefire, accompanied by a commitment by Ukraine to constitutional reforms pertaining to the Donbas, agreed by the same leaders in Feb. 2015.]

On Apr. 6, Ukraine put forward a new draft agreement based on the talks in Istanbul and by video the week before. The next day, Lavrov raised a number of objections to the draft. He said it “marks a clear departure from the most important provisions that were recorded at the Istanbul meeting on March 29 in a document signed by the Ukrainian delegation’s head Arakhamia.” He said that, although Ukraine had agreed in Istanbul that its security guarantees wouldn’t apply to Crimea, there are no such statements in the draft agreement. He also objected to the idea that the issues of Crimea and Donbass should be discussed by the presidents, and raised again his objection to Ukraine’s proposed sequence of ceasefire, Russian troop withdrawal, then Ukrainian referendum: “Surely Ukraine will next request a withdrawal of Russian troops and will keep piling up preconditions. The plan is clear and unacceptable.” He also noted that in Istanbul Ukraine had agreed that it would host military exercises involving the forces of other states only with the consent of all guarantor countries, including Russia. “However, the draft document does not contain this clear provision and speaks about the possibility of holding drills with the consent of the majority of guarantor countries, without mentioning Russia.”

There have been widespread reports that Putin, in a press conference last Tuesday after meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, said the peace talks are dead. In fact, those

reports misstated what he said. According to the official transcript of the press conference, Putin said, “With regard to the negotiations, look, we reached certain agreements in Istanbul, under which security guarantees for Ukraine – and the Ukrainian side is striving to obtain very strict security guarantees for itself – will not apply to Crimea, Sevastopol and Donbass. Then, as you know, we made certain efforts to create a proper environment for continuing the negotiating process. In return, the Ukrainian side walked away from the Istanbul agreements. Now, security requirements have become a separate issue, and regulating our relations over Crimea, Sevastopol and Donbass will be taken out of the scope of these agreements. That is, they have returned to a dead-end for themselves and for all of us.” Continuing, he said, “I was told that the Ukrainian side made some changes again last night. I am not aware of what these changes are. But this kind of inconsistency regarding fundamental issues creates certain difficulties on the negotiating track if we want to reach final agreements that are acceptable to everyone. And until this happens, the military operation will continue until it is completed and the goals that were set at the beginning of this operation are fulfilled.” His point was not that the peace talks are dead but, rather, that Ukraine’s changing position with regard to its security guarantees was making it difficult to conclude a peace agreement. But he also made it clear that, at some point, there will be further talks; indeed, after thanking Lukashenko for hosting the first rounds of talks, he said, “We believe the Belarusian platform is quite suitable for further meetings.”

Will there be peace talks soon? The Russian campaign to “liberate” the Donbas is just beginning. And even when it is completed, and however it ends, the growing record of Russian atrocities in Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Bucha and other towns and cities in the Kyiv region will make it difficult for representatives of Ukraine to sit at the same negotiating table and conclude a peace agreement with representatives of Russia – especially if, as seems likely, the agreement will in all likelihood include a de facto acceptance of the loss of Crimea and, quite possibly, the loss of a substantial portion of eastern Ukraine, including not only the Donetsk and Luhansk regions but also the “land bridge” to Crimea. Nevertheless, on Thursday, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu said he is planning to meet with Lavrov and there are plans for Erdoğan to meet with Putin in the near future. And, he said, Turkey is also holding negotiations with both sides in an effort to organize a meeting between Putin and Zelenskyy in the near future.

But unfortunately for those living in the Donbas, before those meetings happen, and before a peace agreement and a ceasefire are concluded, the Russian forces under the control of the “butcher of Syria” will conduct their “special military operation” to “liberate” (and no doubt enlarge) the territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics.” And many more lives will be lost.

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