

**Russia making progress in “liberation” of the Donbas. But still unable to declare victory, Putin may declare war, annexation of Donbas & land bridge to Crimea on Victory Day.**



UK Defence Intelligence map of war in Ukraine as of May 3.

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. On Feb. 24, 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 nine weeks, Russia attacked Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson, Dnipro, Mariupol, Odesa and other cities 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 7.7 million Ukrainians had been displaced from their homes by mid-April, and as of yesterday 5.6 million have fled to neighboring countries. The attacks on the cities 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, first deputy chief of Russia’s General Staff of the Armed Forces and head of its Main Operational Directorate, said, “The main objectives of the first stage of the operation have generally been accomplished. The combat potential of the Armed Forces of Ukraine has been considerably reduced, which...makes it possible to focus on the main efforts to achieve the main goal, the liberation of Donbass. Units of the LPR [Luhansk People’s Republic] People's Militia have liberated 93% of the republic's territory. Fighting is now taking place on the approaches to Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, The DPR [Donetsk People’s Republic] People's Militia has taken control of 54% of the territory. The liberation of the city of Mariupol continues. Units of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, jointly with the DPR People's Militia, are conducting an offensive to liberate populated areas west of Donetsk.”

In order to overcome the problems of coordination and communication that occurred in the initial campaign directed at Kyiv, Army Gen. Aleksandr Dvornikov, the commander of the Southern Military District, headquartered in Rostov and adjacent to the Donetsk region, was placed in charge of the effort to “liberate” the Donbas. As commander of the Southern Military District, Dvornikov, widely-known (outside Russia) as “the butcher of Syria” for what the forces under his command did there in 2015-16, had been in charge of the “operation” in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, and in that capacity was responsible for the near-obliteration of Mariupol. After overseeing the re-organization, provisioning, and deployment of the forces under his command, Dvornikov opened a 300-mile front and began the “operation” to “liberate” the Donbas – an operation Putin reportedly pledged would be completed by Victory Day, May 9.

For obvious reasons, it has been difficult for reporters to cover the ongoing conflict in the Donbas. But the maps issued each day by the British Ministry of Defence, coupled with the daily briefings issued by Defence Intelligence, provide some information in regard to the situation on the ground in Ukraine. If one compares the map of the areas held or contested by Russia in late March at the time Rudskoy announced the shift in focus to the Donbas with today’s map (above), the largest and most significant change is the complete disappearance of Russian control or contestation of territory that included territory north of Kyiv and Chernihiv, Krolevets, Konotop, Romny, and Sumy in the north, and stretching down to Kharkiv in the northeast. Today’s map suggests that, while Russia has withdrawn from all of those areas, it has taken a substantial portion of territory northeast and east of Iziium and a substantial portion of the territory between Donetsk and Mariupol and Zaporizhzhia. And it has also made significant gains creating in effect a “land bridge” connecting Donetsk and Mariupol through Berdyansk and Melitopol to Crimea. But the maps also suggest there is still a good deal of territory that is being contested by the two armies – in the area north of Kharkiv, the area east and a bit south of Iziium, an area west of Luhansk, a large area west of Volnovakha and east of Zaporizhzhia, and an area north of Nova Kakhovka and Kherson and east of Mykolaiv. And they suggest as well that Ukraine has made some gains – most notably, in the area east of Kramatorsk.

When Russia shifted its focus in late March to the “liberation” of the Donbas, many observers speculated that Putin assumed the “liberation” would be completed in time for him to declare victory at the ceremonies on May 9, Victory Day, the day World War II ended. But that hasn’t happened and won’t happen by next Monday. Although Russia has made some important territorial gains in eastern Ukraine, there is still a significant amount of contested territory, and

Ukraine will still be fighting on May 9. When asked two days ago by an Italian television network whether, as many have speculated, the war will end by May 9, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made it clear the war won't be over by then: "Our servicemen will not artificially time their actions to any date, including Victory Day. We will solemnly observe May 9, like we always do. We will remember everyone who died to liberate Russia and other former USSR republics, to liberate Europe from the Nazi plague. The pace of the operation in Ukraine depends first of all on the need to minimise risks for civilians and Russian military personal."

Over the past two months, Russia has made substantial progress in its effort to "liberate" the Donbas. But despite the fact that it now holds much of the territory in eastern Ukraine and in southern Ukraine between the Donbas and Crimea, Russia cannot yet claim victory. And so, when Russia celebrates Victory Day next Monday, rather than celebrating, as he had hoped, Russia's victory over Ukraine, Putin is likely to underscore the urgent need to finish the war and, toward that end, announce that Russia is declaring war on Ukraine. And he is likely to announce that Russia intends to annex the Donbas as well as the territory that will provide Russia with a land bridge to Crimea.

David R. Cameron  
May 3, 2022

*David R. Cameron is a Professor emeritus and Lecturer in Political Science at Yale.*