

Ukraine takes back territory in Kharkiv & Kherson regions and holds back Russians in Donetsk region



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BBC

On Feb. 21, Russia’s 30-member Security Council agreed, in response to appeals from the leaders of the two “People’s Republics” created by pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea, to recognize the independence and sovereignty of the two entities. President Vladimir Putin signed executive orders formally recognizing them as well as treaties of “friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance” with both and subsequently ordered the deployment of additional troops to the pseudo-states to reinforce the Russian troops already there. Three days later, Putin 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 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. Initially focused not only on eastern Ukraine but also on the Kyiv region, the territory between Kyiv and Kharkiv, and southern Ukraine adjacent to Crimea, in late March, after the attack in the Kyiv region had stalled in the face of strong resistance, Russia shifted the focus of the “special military operation” to eastern Ukraine and proclaimed as its main objective the “liberation” of the Donbas.

After the focus of the “special military operation” shifted to the Donbas, one of the most prominent targets was the city of Severodonetsk, with a pre-war population of 100,000 in the Luhansk region. After a prolonged attack on that city, in late June the Ukrainian forces withdrew and the Russians turned their attention to Lysychansk, another city of roughly 100,000 just to the west. In early July, the Ukrainian forces withdrew from that city as well. At that point, after

having taken almost all of Luhansk region, Russia focused on the substantial portion of Donetsk region that was still held by Ukrainian forces. In particular, it focused on two cities in that region – Kramatorsk, which had a pre-war population of roughly 160,000 and, ten miles to the north, Slovyansk, a city of roughly 110,000. However, more than two months later, those two cities, as well as a substantial portion of Donetsk region, are still held by Ukrainian forces, despite the announcement almost six months ago that the “special military operation” would henceforth focus on the “liberation” of the Donbas.

Russia’s effort to “liberate” the Donbas has stalled in large part because a substantial portion of its forces are engaged in combat with Ukrainian forces elsewhere – most notably, in Kharkiv region in the northeast of Ukraine, just to the west of the Donbas, and in Kherson region in southern Ukraine near the Black Sea. After Russia failed to take Kyiv in the early days of the war, its forces nevertheless took a substantial portion of territory in the Kharkiv region. Earlier this month, Ukraine launched an offensive to reclaim that region. Taking the Russian forces by surprise, the Ukrainian forces quickly took back a substantial amount of territory, including last weekend the cities of Kupyansk and Izyum near the Donbas which, although not large, are important road and rail hubs in the region. Indeed, by last weekend the Ukrainian forces had taken back all of Kharkiv region except for a small slice of territory east of the Oskil River. The Russian ministry of defense announced its forces in Kharkiv region were “re-grouping” in the Donbas – a euphemism for a hasty retreat. Having taken Izyum, the Ukrainian forces are now moving toward Lyman and, after securing their control of Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, may attempt to retake Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, which they lost in June and July.

While the Russian forces that were until recently in the Kharkiv region are “re-grouping” in the Donbas, other Russian troops in eastern Ukraine have been transferred to southern Ukraine, where Ukraine has launched an offensive to take back Kherson region. This summer Russia took control of the city of Kherson, which had a pre-war population of almost 300,000, and a substantial portion of Kherson region on the Black Sea in southern Ukraine and began to push westward toward Mykolaiv. The Ukrainian forces have thwarted the Russian move westward by destroying several bridges across the Dnipro River the Russian forces had been using to supply the troops west of the river. And when the Russian forces installed portable pontoon bridges to replace the damaged or destroyed bridges, the Ukrainian forces destroyed those as well. The Ukrainian forces also began a significant offensive that aims to retake the city and region of Kherson. That offensive continues and the Russians have been forced to bring in additional troops from eastern Ukraine, which of course reduces the resources they have available to complete the so-called “liberation” of the Donbas.

Russia’s war in Ukraine is certainly not over. Indeed, there is no end yet in sight. Nevertheless, in the last couple of weeks, Ukraine has won significant battles on three fronts – in taking back almost all of Kharkiv region, in resisting any significant advance by Russian forces in Donetsk region, and by thwarting Russia’s advance toward Mykolaiv and threatening its control of the city and region of Kherson in the south.

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