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Ukraine: The Line

Author(s): International Crisis Group

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Ukraine: The Line

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I. Overview

The 500km line of separation between Russian-supported separatist districts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the rest of Ukraine is not fit for purpose. The cease-fire negotiated at the February 2015 Minsk talks is being violated daily and heavily. Tens of thousands of well-armed troops confront each other in densely populated civilian areas. The sides are so close that even light infantry weapons can cause substantial damage, let alone the heavy weapons they regularly use. This presents major risks to civilians who still live there – about 100,000 on the Ukrainian side alone, according to an unofficial estimate – often next door to troops who have taken over unoccupied houses. It also heightens the risk of an escalation. Kyiv, Moscow and the separatists all bear responsibility for the security and well-being of civilians living along the front line.

Likewise, Kyiv's European allies, Washington and Moscow all have crucial roles to play in addressing the overall situation. They should insist that both sides withdraw their heavy weapons, as Minsk requires, from the front line to storage areas monitored by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). They should also press their respective allies – the Ukrainian government on one side, and the self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DNR and LNR) on the other – to separate troops from civilians and to substantially widen the line of separation. Russia's role in this is vital. It insists it is not a party to the conflict, but its military intervention in early 2014 triggered the crisis; two major incursions by its armed forces in 2014 and 2015 deepened it; and it is now the sole source of military, economic and other assistance to the two entities. Its officers train and largely command the separatist forces, and it continues to assure the separatists that it will intervene again if Ukraine attacks. Given Russia's continued role in the conflict, international sanctions need to be maintained.

There is little doubt that the death toll is significantly higher than either side admits. Fighting takes place daily along large parts of the line, much of it unreported. Both sides often use howitzers, heavy mortars and rocket systems or park them menacingly in the centre of large urban areas where they risk at the least becoming targets for the other's artillery. The Minsk agreement to withdraw heavy weaponry, meanwhile, is violated daily.

Both sides should take urgent measures to address the security and humanitarian, including health, needs of the civilians stranded along the front line. Troops and military equipment should be moved out of civilian buildings and settlements. It would be helpful if the OSCE, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) specifically

identified in their public monitoring reports those locations where civilians and military are intermingled. Ukraine also urgently needs to address the humanitarian fallout of the conflict, including clear signs of psychiatric distress in front-line villages. If it is unable to do this, an experienced international organisation like Doctors without Borders should be encouraged to survey the needs. And the Ukrainian government should order local civil administrators, most of whom seem to have abandoned settlements on the front line, to return to work and at least be in contact with the population concerned.

The humanitarian crisis on the front line is also a political one. President Poroshenko's poll ratings in the east, including those areas Kyiv controls, have declined substantially. One oft-cited reason is the sense that the country's leadership is not interested in the east. Ukraine, whose sovereignty over the occupied territories is internationally recognised, needs to take the lead in addressing these problems. Doing so would not be a sign of weakness, as some Ukrainian voices argue, or imply equal guilt with Moscow for the damage inflicted by the conflict. On the contrary, it would be proof that Kyiv was acting as a legitimate and responsible member of the international community that cares for the well-being of all its citizens.

The government-controlled areas of the two oblasts are also the stronghold of one of Ukraine's main opposition parties, the Opposition Bloc. Widely described as pro-Russian and oligarch-funded, the Bloc is running nationwide ahead or neck and neck with the president's party in many polls. Failure to help its own citizens on the border thus could well have political cost for the Kyiv leadership and fuel conflict by strengthening anti-government feelings in Luhansk and Donetsk.

This briefing, based on travels along the Kyiv-controlled side of the line of separation in April-May 2016, focuses on the intermingling of civilians and military in front-line areas on the Ukrainian side. It also surveys the views and outlook of Ukrainian military officers stationed along the front line. The officers are younger and more confident than those encountered two years ago. But their opinions were biting and critical of the country's political and military leadership, including President Petro Poroshenko. The president and other top leaders would be well advised to pay more attention to the mood of what is in essence the next generation of Ukrainian military commanders. All officers interviewed described the Minsk process as dead and strongly supported the idea, floated by some leading politicians, to seal off the separatist enclaves for the foreseeable future – a policy move the international community should caution against in no uncertain terms.

II. Home on the Front

A. *Elusive Statistics*

Government officials in Kyiv and in the east were unable to provide figures for the number of civilians still living in the many villages and settlements that are now part of the front line. Staff of the Agency for the Restoration of Donbas, the very theoretical government lead for work in the east, said they knew of no consolidated data.¹

¹ The Agency has suffered since its inception in mid-2015 from a lack of budget, staff and premises. For six months it was simply "me and my briefcase", its head, Vadim Chernysh, recalled. "Министр Вадим Черныш: Доноры готовы давать больше денег на восстановление Донбасса" ["Minister

The Donetsk governor's office, Donetsk police, internal affairs ministry and state statistical service, among others, were unable to provide up-to-date figures.

Enquiries to local military or civil administrators in the combat zones yielded some estimates: 10,000 highly vulnerable in the Luhansk district of Popasna; 1,500 in the industrial town of Avdiivka, whose suburbs are part of the front line; a substantial portion of the population of Marinka, a small front-line town with a pre-war population of over 9,000; and 1,500 out of a village of 3,000 in a position close to Mariupol.² The UN Humanitarian Response Plan for 2016 estimates the civilian population in Ukrainian-controlled front-line areas at 200,000. Other specialised international organisations feel this may be an overstatement. Given a pre-war population of approximately 230,000 in these areas of Luhansk and Donetsk, it seems reasonable to assume that the most at-risk population – those living in government-controlled areas where front-line military units are based, and which are frequently subject to attacks – number around 100,000.

Crisis Group was not able to conduct research on the separatist side of the front, as access to much of the separatist-controlled territory is becoming increasingly difficult.³ However, earlier visits to the self-proclaimed People's Republics and reports from major international organisations leave no doubt that the intermingling of civilians and military is also prevalent there.

There is no distinction between military positions and civilian dwellings in many front-line settlements.⁴ Combat units are embedded in villages, usually scattered in houses beside civilian dwellings. In Marinka, a town just beyond the western edge of Donetsk city, many civilians still live in Matrosova Street, once a quiet area of pleasant small houses and large gardens. Military units now occupy abandoned houses, and the beginning of the front line is marked by a heavy machine gun position on the street corner. Separatist positions are 150 metres or less away. During firefights, which usually happen at night and are frequent, casualties are evacuated along Matrosova and parallel streets. An officer who coordinated casualty evacuations noted that he preferred to use small passenger cars rather than ambulances, as those drew heavy incoming fire that left civilians "pretty scared".⁵

In the hamlet of Zaitseve, military armour pokes out of the bushes, and visitors observed fresh craters from a 152mm howitzer and an 82mm mortar on the edge of a newly tilled vegetable plot. Local people said the shells had dropped short of a military position. On Kirova Street in Avdiivka, a Ukrainian military observation post is on

Vadim Chernysh: donors are ready to give more money for the restoration of Donbas"], *Ukrainian Pravda*, 25 April 2016. Elevated to ministerial level by the government of Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman in April 2016, it is still chronically underfunded and staffed. Deputy Minister Georgiy Tuka stated in late May that it consisted of four people.

² Crisis Group interviews, civilian officials and military commanders, Popasna, Avdiivka, Marinka, Dokuchayevsk and other locations in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, April, May 2016.

³ MSF had to suspend their activities in LNR and DNR in July 2015. That September, the LNR denied MSF further accreditation and gave it a week to leave. One month later, the DNR did the same. No official reason was given for the decision. Crisis Group interview, MSF senior official, Kyiv, 9 May 2016.

⁴ Aspects of the military, political and social situation in eastern Ukraine can be found in earlier Crisis Group reporting, notably Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°79, *Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine*, 5 February 2016; Report N°235, *Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter*, 18 December 2014; and Briefing N°73, *The Ukraine Crisis: Risks of Renewed Military Conflict after Minsk II*, 1 April 2015.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Marinka, 12 April 2016.

high ground behind residents' gardens. Just across the road, troops occupy houses, one of which had been seriously damaged in fighting a few weeks earlier. The front line is only 50 to 100 metres away.

B. *Those Who Stay*

Those who remain in the front-line area usually have nowhere else to go or lack the means to leave. They are more likely women than men, are often pensioners and sometimes have to care for family members too infirm to leave.⁶ Moving requires considerably more financial outlay than pensioners can afford. A one-bedroom apartment in Kramatorsk, the temporary seat of the Ukrainian government's Donetsk regional administration, costs approximately 1,500 hryvnia (\$60) per month, about three quarters of a monthly pension. Utilities would add substantially to this. With schools closed or on the other side of the line and mines everywhere, families have usually left or sent children to relatives. Schools and health facilities in Horlivka, some 15km from the front, used to service a significant part of the area, but the large industrial town is now on the separatist side of the front, a strategic part of the defences of Donetsk city and frequently subject to shelling and attacks.

Few if any civilian males of military age have stayed – not surprisingly given military suspicions that locals are separatist sympathisers (see below). Often one person, usually a woman, has remained to ensure that the family home is not sequestered by the military or damaged. The military takeover of temporarily uninhabited homes and other buildings seems ad hoc and arbitrary. In many places, the houses have become billets for small units or fire positions. As a soldier explained, a house is more comfortable to live in than a trench.⁷ In some places, residents have protested, usually with little success.⁸

People living along the front line have drastically simplified their daily routine. Most sleep in cellars for all or part of the night, remaining close to their house and shelter through late morning. Firing usually tapers off around noon or early afternoon, before residents edge closer to shelters. Work prospects in the villages have largely disappeared. Those previously employed outside them are unable to travel, most local mines are closed, and farming has become dangerous.

The front line has cut through some of eastern Europe's richest farmland and vegetable gardens, bringing agriculture to a halt in most places and making even subsistence farming dangerous. Large fields are mostly untilled, for fear of shelling or mines (see below). Any planting is usually limited to potatoes in vegetable patches close to the house – in some cases the small green space outside village houses where in quieter times the elderly would sit. Even these relatively sheltered areas are vulnerable. In Avdiivka, the coke-smelting town whose suburbs flow into the front line, a 75-year-old woman was killed by what locals say was an incoming shell while working on her potatoes. The police report attributed her death to "careless handling of ammunition".⁹

⁶ Life expectancy in Ukraine in 2014 was 76 for women, 66 for men, according to the World Bank. World Bank Open Data, <http://data.worldbank.org>.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, Marinka, 12 April 2016.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Avdiivka, mid-April, early May 2016.

⁹ *Ibid.* The incident happened on 8 April. Crisis Group was shown the police certificate, which officially registered the woman's death.

The military on both sides carries out hit-and-run raids from largely civilian areas. Several front-line residents in Avdiivka related how a small Ukrainian unit recently sped in, strafed its foes, then pulled back.¹⁰ These actions inevitably trigger retaliation, well after the soldiers have left. Donetsk residents described separatist mortar teams using the same tactics and provoking the same response.¹¹

Given the volatility of the situation, few who have left show any sign of wanting to return permanently to the villages. Residents of Zaitseve reported a family briefly returning to plant potatoes, "in case there is peace later this year". Villagers said that even occasional visits from relief agencies offer little hope. An international organisation explained to Avdiivka residents that it was too early to distribute roofing and other building materials, as they would only have to be replaced again in a few months.¹²

Those able to leave are among the 1.7 million officially registered internally displaced persons (IDPs).¹³ About one million are registered as living in other parts of Luhansk and Donetsk, though it is quite possible that many have moved elsewhere or even returned home on the other side of the line. Most IDPs are said to live with relatives, friends or in rental accommodations in larger towns that offer more safety and work opportunities.

C. *Military-civilian Relations*

Civilians in the east agree that the Ukrainian military's behaviour has improved substantially since the grim days of 2014, when its troops were a byword for indiscipline, drunkenness and sometimes violence.¹⁴ But there are lingering suspicions on both sides. Some civilians, echoing a line favoured by many separatist propagandists, discreetly remarked to visitors that if the troops were not living next door, their homes would not be under fire.¹⁵

The military has its own preconceptions regarding the locals. One holds that civilians have chosen to remain at the front because of separatist sympathies. Quite often, in Avdiivka for example, residents reported allegations by soldiers that local people helped DNR sabotage teams that slipped into the area at night.¹⁶ Another frequent comment offered by the military was that local people were getting what they had asked for in the May 2014 separatist-organised referendum on self-determination. Some senior officers were more direct: "50 per cent of my civilians are separatists", claimed a battalion commander; in another area, an officer estimated hard-core sympathisers at about 10 per cent of the population.¹⁷ Soldiers said they could hear separatist radio stations from their civilian neighbours' homes, which reinforced

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Kirov Street (Avdiivka), 12 April 2016.

¹¹ Donetsk residents often noted this in the first nine months of 2015. Such incidents were referred to again in May 2016. Crisis Group interview, DNR resident, Kyiv, 19 May 2016.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, Zaitseve, 11 April 2016; resident, Avdiivka, 12 April 2016.

¹³ As of 4 May 2016, 1,783,361 IDPs were registered, over a million of whom were women and 22,428 were from Crimea, according to the social policy ministry.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, local government officials, Avdiivka area, 12 April 2016. There are disturbing exceptions, though. In Popasna district, Luhansk, a local official said most hooliganism, petty violence and drunkenness would "disappear overnight" if a unit of the Kievskaya Rus' volunteer battalion was pulled out of the district. Crisis Group interview, 5 May 2016.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Marinka, mid-April 2016; Avdiivka, early May 2016.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Avdiivka, Dokuchayevsk, Marinka, mid-April, early May 2016.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Mariupol Sector (henceforth referred to as Sector M), 15 April 2016; Luhansk oblast, May 2016.

their suspicion. One of the few local officials on the ground remarked that, on the rare occasion he or his colleagues were able to achieve something for the local population, separatist media claimed credit, and the news quickly spread among locals.¹⁸

Separatist media are ubiquitous, because in the vast majority of settlements along the front line, towers carrying Ukrainian broadcasting were destroyed in the early days of the fighting and have not been replaced. The only choice for most civilians are local radio stations from nearby separatist-controlled towns. The governor of Donetsk acknowledged the problem but noted that repair of transmission equipment is the central authorities' responsibility.¹⁹

D. *Mines*

Visitors to a hamlet in Zaitseve are instructed on arrival to use only well-trodden paths between houses, never shortcuts. Mines – anti-personnel and anti-armour – have been laid all across the front line. Both sides recently added trip wire devices. Few have been mapped, so regular troop rotations mean that any institutional memory of the mines' location has been lost. Inhabitants of the front-line villages often cite mines as the main reason for sending children to relatives. "The shelling is bad enough, but at least we see or hear the risk: with mines you had to keep children in prison", a woman explained.²⁰ On Kirova Street in Avdiivka, a resident said his five dogs had "gone", probably killed by mines just beyond his back garden, which opens out on the front.²¹

Demining specialists believe that clearing all mines once hostilities end will take a minimum of five years and up to twenty if sufficient funding is not available. Large-scale demining cannot begin, however, until the Ukrainian parliament passes legislation determining which government authority oversees the removal of mines and unexploded ordnance, and establishing national technical standards, including a framework for the accreditation and quality. Meanwhile, the number of mines and explosive remnants of war is increasing daily.²² Western diplomats say the legislation is so far moving slowly.²³

E. *Distress and Alcohol*

The sheer terror of living in a war zone, the highly limited opportunity of moving even a few miles away, the lack of work, the separation of families and general social disruption have for two years subjected the remaining inhabitants of front-line areas to inordinate social pressure that has disproportionately devolved upon women. The state has done little or nothing to address these problems, and visits by international monitors and aid organisations are rare. Residents are mostly anxious and depressed: few conversations continue for more than a few minutes without an interlocutor showing signs of this.²⁴

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, district council official, Popasna district (Luhansk), 5 May 2016.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kramatorsk, 14 May 2016.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Zaitseve, 11 April 2016.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, Avdiivka, early May 2016.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Danish Demining Group, Slavyansk, Kyiv, April 2016.

²³ Crisis Group interview, European ambassador, Kyiv, 25 May 2016.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Zaitseve, 11 April; Avdiivka, mid-April and early May 2016.

Alcohol abuse has long been an engrained feature of village life in Russian and Russian-speaking areas, but usually among men.²⁵ In villages along the front line, alcohol consumption by women is widespread. Church volunteers in Marinka, as well as members of other local groups working with villagers, expressed concern that constant military activity was leading to an increase in serious diseases. After particularly heavy attacks in mid-June, a pastor reported “pathologies” among the local children: “their hair starts falling out, their legs and arms shake, and some stop speaking”.²⁶ None of the villagers recalled visits by psychiatric health professionals.²⁷ A senior regional government official shrugged off the question when asked if such visits had been made.²⁸ There is urgent need for a survey of the psychiatric health needs on the front line by a competent international body.

F. *Where Are the Officials?*

A number of local government officials recently joined a delegation of the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) Human Rights Committee on a visit to Marinka. The committee chair, Hrihoriy Nemyria, recalled that local people were surprised they were from the district administration. No one recognised them: local officials left with the onset of war and have been handling administrative affairs from the small resort town of Kurakhove, a good distance from the front.²⁹ Zaitseve residents said they did not recall any visits by officials.³⁰ A military commander in Dokuchayevsk mentioned that civilian administrators initially joined him on front visits. They would note requests, leave and not follow up. “People here are abandoned” by the local government, he said. “There is no sense of interest in their problems, and the quality of civilian officials is very low”.³¹ The result is that people on the front line are left to fend for themselves.

G. *Holes in the Line*

There are six official vehicle-crossing points between Ukrainian and separatist-controlled territories, while mostly local people use a hastily-repaired bridge in Stanitsia-Luhanska, the single official pedestrian crossing. Over 700,000 passed through the official checkpoints in May, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). They tend not to live along the front line, are usually relatively affluent, own vehicles, can pay for fuel and food and have a certain sophistication in dealing with the sometimes intimidating military or security personnel. Even so, the crossing is challenging. Waits of ten hours or more – often overnight – are common. Crossing points are usually close to military installations, increasing the danger of shelling or mines.³² Many who live on the front line, on the other hand,

²⁵ Military and other observers also commented on the exceptionally heavy drinking among civilians living on the line. “By the time they come up in the morning [from their cellars], they are all under the influence”, an officer remarked of the civilians in his area of responsibility. Crisis Group interview, Sector M, 15 April 2016.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Marinka, 14 April 2016; Sergey Kosyak, Facebook post, 20 June 2016.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Zaitseve, 11 April 2016.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Kramatorsk, 14 May 2016.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 20 April 2016.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Zaitseve 11 April 2016.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Sector M, 16 April 2016.

³² “Humanitarian Bulletin Ukraine”, OCHA, issue 10, 1-31 May 2016. The bulletin also noted that 25 per cent of those using the vehicle crossings did so to handle property issues.

have neither the money nor experience required to deal with men in uniform. Some complain that they are asked at Ukrainian checkpoints for proof they are registered as displaced, which they are not.³³

On rare occasions, local officials on both sides have unofficially created crossing points. These purely local initiatives, distinct from the officially stipulated crossing areas, allow front-line residents to visit nearby settlements on the other side to buy food – considerably cheaper on the Ukrainian side – visit relatives and, when possible, collect pensions. They must show proof of registration in a settlement close to the border: despite the current armed conflict, all Ukrainian citizens remain required to register in their place of permanent residence. Two such informal points were known to exist as of early 2016. One, in Popasna, remains functional while another, near Marinka, has reportedly closed.³⁴

There are other ways to get across, but not for simple residents. Ukrainian soldiers know the village of Verkhnetoetskoye as a smugglers' crossing. Some contraband is for local consumption, but much is part of the major smuggling operation – of coal, scrap, weapons and probably drugs – that is enriching officials on both sides of the line. A prominent blogger and volunteer supporter of the armed forces, Yuriy Kasyanov, described watching a goods train passing through the village and into the separatist-controlled area of Donetsk oblast. Fighters from the ultra-nationalist Right Sector prepared to attack the smugglers' train, but were stopped, Kasyanov said, by Ukrainian soldiers.³⁵

There has also been at least one instance of soldiers on both sides cooperating to improve conditions on their part of the front. Ukrainian troops said that sometime in May 2016, they contacted the troops facing them; one of their number crossed to the opposing front line and over a bottle of vodka suggested they might shoot at them less often. The separatists explained that military service was one of the few ways to earn money in the entities – a frequently heard complaint in the DNR. They reportedly agreed, however, that on those days when they were on duty they would fire away from their targets. They added that they could not answer for the Russian troops on duty the other days.³⁶

III. The Military

Around 90,000 troops face each other across the 500km-long line of separation. The Ukrainian government says it has 69,000 troops in its Anti-Terror Operation (ATO) zone, not all of whom are based directly on the front line.³⁷ Kyiv and its allies usually estimate the separatist military strength at 35,000, though this is probably high.³⁸ In addition, Ukrainian officials say, more than 8,000 Russian troops remain inside the

³³ Crisis Group interviews, local residents, Zaitseve, 11 April 2016.

³⁴ Functioning of the informal crossing: Crisis Group interview, senior district official, Popasna district, Luhansk, 5 May 2016. Closure of Marinka crossing: communication to Crisis Group, local residents, May 2016.

³⁵ Yuriy Kasyanov, Facebook post, 8 April 2016.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, front line, Sector M sector, early May 2016.

³⁷ President Petro Poroshenko, speech to Verkhovna Rada, Kyiv, 14 April 2016.

³⁸ A senior U.S. Department of Defense official suggested, for example, that 35,000 might cover all military-aged residents of the two enclaves who carry an assault rifle. Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, 7 January 2016.

separatist entities, with a much larger force permanently stationed just the other side of the border, ready to intervene.³⁹ Moscow denies any such plans, just as it does having ever intervened militarily in Ukraine over the past two years. Separatist officials say the permanent Russian military presence is considerably less than Ukraine claims, but they stress that Russian troops on the border could deploy throughout the entities in hours if needed.⁴⁰

A. *Officer Politics – Criticism of the President, Support for Sealing-off the Separatists*

Most observers agree that the Ukrainian military is very different from the poorly led, often demoralised force sent into action two years ago. Many battalion commanders and their deputies are in their early thirties. A lieutenant colonel who hopes to leave soon for staff college said most of his peers in neighbouring front-line positions were between 29 and 32. At 34, he is feeling old, he joked.⁴¹ In private, the officers are deeply critical of their country's military and political leadership. One started his analysis by describing the deadlock in the conflict as beneficial to both Russian and Ukrainian leaders: "The Russians can maintain pressure on us, and our president has an excuse for not carrying out reforms".⁴²

All expressed belief that the Minsk process is "dead".⁴³ This line has been increasingly echoed by Ukrainian officials, Western diplomats and many Russian commentators.⁴⁴ As a result, the officers said, the crisis could only be solved by military means. None, however, felt this would happen soon. There is wide agreement among ana-

³⁹ Figures given by Slovo I Delo website, citing Ukrainian defence ministry. <http://ru.slovoidilo.ua/2015/12/17/infografika/bezopasnost/vojska-rossii-i-boevikov-na-donbasse>.

⁴⁰ Immediately after the February 2015 Minsk agreement was signed, President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov stressed that Russia would act as a guarantor, though it was not directly concerned. "We simply can't [implement the Minsk agreement] physically because Russia is not a participant in the conflict". "Russia guarantor of Ukraine settlement, not party fulfilling deal – Kremlin", Sputnik News, 13 February 2015. For separate official estimates of Russian forces and posture, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine*, op. cit.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Sector M, 17 April 2016.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Avdiivka, 9 May 2016.

⁴³ The central working document for the current peace process is the Minsk agreement of 12 February 2015. This is a thirteen-point plan to take eastern Ukraine from war through normalisation – withdrawal of troops and heavy weapons, exchange of prisoners, amnesty and local elections, Ukrainian constitutional changes with guarantees for the breakaway districts, and finally the handover of a large section of Russian-controlled border to the Ukrainian government. This was to have been completed by the end of 2015. In fact, implementation has barely begun. OSCE monitors are working, but there is little progress on prisoner exchange, none on all-important local elections and most other key clauses. Both sides accuse the other of bad faith. Increased ceasefire violations are probably an expression of anger on both sides. Meanwhile, European financial sanctions on Russia are due to be maintained until Minsk is implemented.

⁴⁴ A senior Western official closely involved in the Minsk process made this point recently. Consultations in the Trilateral Contact Group (Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE) continue essentially in order to keep communications open, he said. Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 19 May 2016. Aleksey Chesnakov, a prominent Russian analyst closely involved in Moscow's eastern Ukraine policy, described the situation in a February 2016 report as one of "infinite deadlock". "Бесконечный тупик. К первой годовщине минских соглашений" ["An infinite deadlock. On the first anniversary of the Minsk Agreements"], Center for Current Policy, 2 February 2016. A Western diplomat involved in the talks said there was a general understanding the process will not produce the desired result but is there to provide a framework and that this will not change soon. Crisis Group interview, Berlin, July 2016.

lysts and the military that while the front-line advantage has shifted moderately in favour of Ukraine (see below), the key factor remains Russia's readiness to intervene militarily in support of the separatists. As long as this holds, the officers felt, Ukraine would not attack to regain control of the entities.

The idea to seal off the separatist entities from the rest of Ukraine, cutting political and economic ties and excluding their population from elections, has been floated since January 2016 by political leaders in Kyiv – including such prominent figures as the secretary of national security and defence, Aleksandr Turchynov, and Rada Speaker Andriy Parubiy. It has gained some support, but also considerable criticism.⁴⁵

Officers interviewed along the line of separation were unanimous in their support for the idea. "People in the separatist areas are totally brainwashed. They still live in the Soviet Union", one said. "Maybe, just maybe, they will one day come to their senses, and they will return to us, but until then we should close them off". Another officer, who hails himself from a separatist-occupied area, was equally blunt: "Let the people who want to be Russian go to Russia; we will help them leave. In the meantime, the separatist districts should be fenced off, and Russia left to support them".⁴⁶

Proponents of sealing the border see a number of advantages, both political and economic. The Minsk agreement obliges Ukraine to pay for the restoration and rehabilitation of the entities, an endeavour that would cost billions of dollars. Sealing the enclaves off would in their view shift the whole financial burden onto Russia, which for months has already been paying salaries and pensions. This would intensify economic pressure on Moscow at a time when it is hard pressed by international sanctions and declining revenues.⁴⁷ The assumption behind this line of thought, however, is questionable – Moscow has not formalised ties with the entities, and while it has provided social support, it has not indicated it would provide reconstruction or rehabilitation funding.

Ukraine is preparing for a difficult transition – with any luck – to a modern Westernised state, and the entities allow Russia to maintain military pressure that forces it to divert major budgetary resources from economic development to defence. Elections during the transition period are likely to be tense and volatile. Removing the entities from the voting process for several years would neutralise the votes of a million or more Ukrainians who, many politicians and analysts believe, would be little inclined to support the country's present leadership.

Proponents of the idea, who say they briefed senior Western ambassadors early this year, maintain that Poroshenko privately is sympathetic to the idea but cannot

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Western diplomat, Kyiv, 26 January 2016. It should be stressed that the idea is just that: there is no canonic version. Its principal proponents, however, view it as a tactic in the military struggle with Russia, not an alternative to this struggle.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, army officers, Zaitseve, Marinka, Avdiivka, Dokuchayevsk and elsewhere, April, early May 2016. The interviewees were witheringly critical of their own General Staff. "You become a staff officer when you finally realise that you cannot command a body of men", said a lieutenant colonel. "If the General Staff ceased to exist tomorrow, it would make no difference to my work", said another.

⁴⁷ There are some signs that salary payments are being delayed in the separatist zones. The staff of at least one Donetsk city hospital said they had not been paid since March and threatened to protest to the de facto DNR head, Alexandr Zakharchenko. Crisis Group email correspondence, Donetsk-city based observer, 15 June 2016.

be seen as in essence amputating part of the country.⁴⁸ Opponents fear sealing off the separatist enclaves would accelerate their slide into organised crime and contraband. Moves to close off the separatist entities from the rest of the country would concern several of the country's most influential oligarchs, who have extensive holdings in the separatist areas. Many made their fortunes during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, and most – Rinat Akhmetov, Sergei Lyovochkin and others – are heavily invested in the area's oil, steel and natural gas. Further limited access would be financially deeply painful to these businessmen. Ukraine's Western allies should stress to all in Kyiv that isolation would be a risky policy choice that could exacerbate the conflict, create new tensions and deepen the sense of many inhabitants of separatist-controlled areas that Kyiv has abandoned them.

B. *Combat, Casualties*

1. Ukrainian strategy: erode and probe

Front-line commanders are more confident than in the past that their troops could make serious inroads into separatist territory, or even destroy the entities, but the main factor stopping such an attempt is the threat of another major Russian invasion. Front-line Ukrainian forces consequently seem to be probing separatist territory in order to gradually erode military manpower. Local commanders noted that separatists are not only less well-trained than Ukrainians, but that it is much harder for them to replace lost equipment or personnel – the latter because of their very small recruitment pool. Many analysts sympathetic to the separatists agreed.⁴⁹

Ukrainian troops have edged forward along most of the line into the so-called grey zone – a thin stretch of land between the fronts which both sides had until recently refrained from entering. By occupying this zone, Ukrainian troops have strengthened their positions along the border modestly, by inhibiting vehicular traffic on the other side, or gaining better forward observation positions. Asked whether this was a new strategy, officers sidestepped the question.

In some cases, the troops are going further. In an area along the Mariupol sector, a battalion commander said his men had moved 1.5km into separatist-controlled territory.⁵⁰ Similar movements have been reported elsewhere. Around Debaltseve, the site of a major Ukrainian defeat in February 2015, a military volunteer from one of the many groups that raise money to equip troops reported that a unit of the 54th

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior state official supporting plans to seal off the east, Kyiv, January 2016. For an alternative point of view, see for example "Тука: Нам придется постепенно открывать торговые шлюзы и снимать блокаду с Донбасса" ["Tuka: We should gradually open up trade and lift the Donbas blockade"], *Zerkalo Nedeli daily*, 30 May 2016. Georgiy Tuka is deputy minister of the new ministry for occupied zones and former governor of Luhansk oblast.

⁴⁹ One oft-discussed assessment of the separatist armed forces published earlier this year by a sympathetic analyst stated that they would not be able to handle a massive Ukrainian attack: "the adversary has at least three times the amount of weapons and equipment, not to mention [a pool] of quickly replenishable human resources. And the [separatist] fighting spirit is unfortunately not what it was in 2014". The assessment is currently available on the nationalist political site Sputnik and Pogrom. "Минский тушик и варианты развития ситуации на Донбассе" [The Minsk dead end and variants for the development of the situation in the Donbas"], Sputnikpogrom.com/war/53344/minsk-dead-end, 7 April 2016.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sector M, 17 April 2016.

Mechanised Brigade had advanced 1.5km and dug in.⁵¹ This could be, as an officer suggested, pure opportunism; it might also be that some units are trying to gauge Russian patience with such incursions. Officers routinely refused to comment on operational matters, but a senior government security adviser and avowed hawk in the confrontation with Russia described the penetrations as efforts by some commanders to maintain morale, combat preparedness and discipline. The static, often trench warfare saps morale, the adviser suggested, and when this happens, “the Ukrainian army drinks”.⁵²

2. A ceasefire ignored

Both sides complain that they are under instructions not to violate the ceasefire. Ukrainian troops said they are told to observe and report violations and only respond if their lives are threatened. “That is an instruction that only a staff officer could think up”, a Ukrainian senior lieutenant complained. “Everything we fire is life-threatening, for f***’s sake”.⁵³ Separatists have complained for months that their Russian military handlers (*kurators*) have strictly enforced the ceasefire.⁵⁴ In fact, both sides have violated the ceasefire daily for several months, most commonly with light weapons, but also with artillery rocket batteries and armour that should have been withdrawn many months ago.

Ukrainian front-line officers all described Russia’s current military posture in the same terms. Its troops have pulled back from the front line: any remaining Russians are usually commanders of the separatist units or small groups of special forces.⁵⁵ The Ukrainians portrayed many of their adversaries as poorly trained locals, with little inclination to fight and drawn more by the pay. Monthly salaries for separatist troops reportedly range from 15,000 roubles (\$230) for a private to 46,500 roubles (\$715) for a colonel.⁵⁶ Some Ukrainian officers, however, singled out several separatist units for grudging approbation: the “Viking” battalion, named for its founder’s radio call-sign, and Vostok, which has been involved in some of the most intense fighting around Avdiivka.⁵⁷

3. Hiding the casualties

Both armed forces play down the intensity of fighting and often under-report casualties. Ukrainian troops on a section of the front line which has not figured extensively in official combat reports stated that they have been involved in almost 60 engage-

⁵¹ Yuriy Misyagin, “Молниеносный бросок у Дебальцево: силы АТО отвоевали у боевиков еще 1,5 км” [“A lightning thrust in Debaltsevo: ATO forces seized another 1.5km from separatist fighters”], GlavRed news website, 11 May 2016. ATO is the acronym for Anti-Terror-Operation, the official term for Ukrainian military operations in eastern Ukraine.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Kyiv, 17 June 2016.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Sector M, 17 April 2016.

⁵⁴ This is covered in more detail in Crisis Group Briefing, *Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine*, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Ukrainian army officers, Zaitsevo, Marinka, Avdiivka, April, early May 2016. Troops in one location asserted that they on occasion found themselves confronting Russian marines. Other Ukrainian officers said this was inaccurate.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group email correspondence, Donetsk-based observer, May 2016. Comparable Ukrainian army salaries for service in the ATO Zone are the equivalent of \$275 and \$630 respectively, according to the defence ministry.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Sector M, 17 April 2016.

ments since deployment in late 2015.⁵⁸ Another officer in the same unit said his troops have taken “heavy” losses but that the figure has been classified – “the General Staff does not want to be embarrassed”.⁵⁹ Civilian volunteers who help resupply Ukrainian troops have at times denounced the official military spokesman for disinformation or covering up the real situation. In March 2016, a volunteer juxtaposed on his social media site a photograph of the burial of elite Ukrainian troops with a military spokesman’s announcement that there were no casualties that day.⁶⁰

The same thing happens on the separatist side. The commander of DNR’s Viking battalion resigned in December 2015 along with a number of staff officers in protest at a high command decision to reclassify military casualties as victims of civilian accidents.⁶¹ Supporters of the separatist militia, usually Russian nationalist groups, have on occasion leaked much higher death tolls than officially admitted. For instance, a supportive website revealed that in late March and early April 2016, separatists had lost at least 90 fighters along a small stretch of the front line around Avdiivka.⁶² More recently, a well-informed Russian nationalist blogger quoted a DNR officer saying that a regiment heavily involved in late May fighting “no longer had” two companies.⁶³

4. A message from Moscow?

Separatist civilian and military officials have admitted privately for some time that the Russian military exercises complete control over militias. Russian officers command units, handle operational planning and oversee the military.⁶⁴ Given regular separatist complaints that they are not allowed to respond to Ukrainian fire without the permission of their Russian commanders, analysts on both sides have posited that sudden spikes of violence along the line are explicit reminders from Moscow that war could quickly escalate if deemed necessary. “I think we sometimes dial up or down the pressure as needed”, a veteran Russian analyst remarked. A recent burst of costly attacks on Ukrainian positions in late May followed signals of Moscow’s frustration with the Minsk process. Shortly before the escalation, a Kyiv politician with close links to Moscow expressed concern the situation could turn ugly.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Sector M, 15 April 9, May 2016.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Sector M, 17 April 2016.

⁶⁰ “Юрий Мысягин” [“Yuriy Mysyagin”], Glavred.info blog, 5 March 2016.

⁶¹ Battalion commander “Viking” – identified as is often the case only by his radio call-sign – interviewed by journalist Gennady Dubovoy, “Викинг: Если будет большое наступление, все сразу станет на свои места” [“Viking: If there is a big offensive, everything will immediately fall into place”], Gennady Dubovoy live journal page, <http://gennadiydubovoy.livejournal.com/16745.html>, 22 December 2015. In one case, Viking said, a soldier killed when his truck hit a mine was said to have died in a fishing accident.

⁶² See “Ukraine’s meat grinder is back in business”, *Foreign Policy* (online), 12 April 2016.

⁶³ Pro-separatist blogger Andrey Chervonets, Червонец Андрюха live journal page. “Сегодняшний разговор с офицером ВСН” [“A conversation today with an officer of the VSN”], chervonec-001.livejournal.com, 30 May 2016. VSN is the Russian acronym for Armed Forces of Novorossiia, the official title of the separatist armed forces. The regiment was identified as Vostok, which is probably deployed near Avdiivka, the site of some of the heaviest current fighting. The DNR officer also blamed Russian advisers for the parlous situation of DNR troops.

⁶⁴ For further discussion of these subjects, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine*, op. cit.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group email correspondence, Moscow-based analyst, May 2016; interview, Kyiv, 23 May 2016.

C. *Unpaid Bonuses, Understrength Front-line Positions*

Ukrainian military confidence and morale may be higher in 2016, but many problems remain. Most are connected to what front-line troops see as incompetence at best, venality at worst among the country's top military and political leadership.

Mid-level officers, in particular the deputy commanders responsible for troop morale and related matters (*zampolit*) in several places raised the same problems. They said troops rarely received the 1,000 hryvnia (approximately \$40) bonus they were promised for every time they were engaged in combat. Other promised bonuses – for destruction of enemy heavy weapons or armour, for example – have also not materialised. Instead, troops have been warned they must reimburse the defence ministry for damaged uniforms and equipment on demobilisation.⁶⁶

Delays in demobilisation are another source of resentment. Troops said they had to stay on the front line for weeks – in one case several months – after their eighteen-month rotation had officially ended. An officer in an affected unit remarked that such delays had drastically reduced the number of conscripts willing to remain in the army under contract at the end of their service. "Six months ago, half my company were ready to sign contracts and stay in the army", he said. Now the number planning to stay is "in single figures".⁶⁷ Shortages of equipment are another regular complaint. Many units still depend to some degree on volunteer groups who raise funds, providing them with anything from electrical cable to night vision gear, binoculars and food.

Troops seem most concerned, however, about the clumsy and chaotic process of bringing front-line units back up to strength when a cohort of conscripts has ended its service and left for home. This often leaves front-line positions dangerously understrength and lacking in combat experience for weeks. "Our 'specialists' have had two years to get this right", an officer said, "and it is still a cock-up".⁶⁸

These delays can have lethal consequences. Lieutenant-Colonel Andriy Zhuk, 32-year old commander of the 3rd battalion of the 72nd independent mechanised brigade (72OMBr) stationed in the area of Dokuchayevsk, was killed on 28 May in a brief clash. An investigative journalist who specialises in military affairs interviewed his fellow officers immediately after. The officer had spent much of the past eighteen months on the front line, and his battalion was desperately short of armour and troops: most of his men had been demobilised in April and he was reportedly left with 100, 20 per cent of a full-strength battalion, to control a 15km stretch of the line. Given the lack of experience of his remaining men, the journalist wrote, he took it upon himself to investigate reports of unidentified armed men and was killed.⁶⁹ An

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, infantry company *zampolit*, Sector M, late April 2016. Senior Lieutenant Vlad Yakushev, the chief press officer for the 14th Independent Mechanised Brigade in Marinka, attacked the practice in an article. "The longer I am in the army, the more I have the impression that somewhere in the defence ministry there are Moscow agents, tasked to undermine our country's defence capability". "Тисяча «бойових» і «агенти Кремля»" ["A thousand hryvnia in combat pay and 'Kremlin agents'"], western Ukrainian news site zik.ua, http://zik.ua/news/2016/02/01/tysyacha_boyovyh_i_agenty_kremlya_668087, 1 February 2016. He was temporarily removed from his position and ultimately offered a staff job, which he refused. Volunteer supporters of the armed forces have created a centre to help soldiers obtain their combat pay: the centre for assistance in receiving combat pay (центр содействия получению боевых выплат).

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, infantry company *zampolit*, Sector M, late April 2016.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Sector M, April 2016.

⁶⁹ Yuriy Butusov, Facebook post, 31 May 2016.

informal 72nd brigade Facebook page posted photographs of Zhuk's funeral. Just under that posting was a message urging any would-be volunteers to make their way directly to brigade positions on the front line, bypassing recruitment centres.⁷⁰

D. *A Non-functioning Pullback*

The persistent and regular violation by both sides of a key part of the Minsk agreements – withdrawal of all heavy weapons from the front line – has further deepened military insecurity and tension. Their ample inventories of heavy weaponry seem to rotate almost permanently from storage areas to front-line positions and back. Most OSCE daily monitoring reports note the absence of tanks, rocket systems and artillery from storage areas and, more occasionally, their return. Weapons covered by the agreement have been extensively used in recent fighting, most often tanks and artillery. Others are relocated to major population centres, usually Luhansk and Donetsk cities. On 5 June, a relatively typical day, monitors checking Ukrainian government sites and positions inventoried a number of forbidden systems, including two surface-to-air SA-8 missile systems, six 152mm towed howitzers, and three 100mm anti-tank guns. They also noted 33 howitzers missing from two storage sites. The next day, monitors recorded Grad missile batteries and anti-aircraft systems in the LNR and DNR areas.⁷¹

OSCE monitors complain regularly that their teams are harassed and on occasion refused access to areas. They also report that their drones have been shot down and monitoring equipment shut down.⁷² They continue to do a thorough job under very difficult circumstances. However, their reports have no tangible consequences for the violator. Until Europe and Washington on one side and Russia on the other are willing to force their allies to observe the pullback – by withholding military or other aid, for example – the situation will remain highly volatile.

IV. Conclusion

A temporary fix on eastern Ukraine's front line has become, by oversight or neglect, a semi-permanent "solution", like so much in the Ukrainian crisis today. In the absence of a genuine settlement, most parties would probably welcome a frozen conflict, even though they are unwilling to say so publicly. But the situation on the ground is too unstable to guarantee even this. There are too many troops far too close to each other. A crucial agreement to withdraw heavy weaponry from the battlefield is violated daily by both sides. The needs of many thousands of civilians stuck along the line and the many grievances of troops who are fighting there have been ignored.

A number of issues need to be addressed immediately. A substantial distance – much more than the 100 or so metres currently common – should separate the sides.

⁷⁰ infocentr.72OMBr, Facebook post, 13 May 2016.

⁷¹ "Latest from OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine, based on information received as of 19:30, 5 June 2016", OSCE, 6 June 2016. Ibid, "as of 19:30, 6 June 2016", OSCE, 7 June 2016. Daily updates can be found on the SMM website (www.osce.org/ukraine-smm).

⁷² The SMM currently deploys some 700 unarmed monitors in Ukraine, 600 of them in Luhansk and Donetsk. It has been using drones since late 2014.

Military positions and civilian settlements should be clearly distinguished. These are not just requirements for Kyiv. The separatists should take the same steps. The DNR and LNR have shown neither capacity nor interest in doing so. Kyiv should do better.

By failing to address these issues, Ukraine's leadership is storing up political problems for the future. Civilians' feeling on both sides of the line that the government has abandoned them plays into the hands of Opposition Bloc, President Poroshenko's major political rival in the east and an important actor in Ukraine's parliament (Rada), where it is often decisive in key votes. Meanwhile, on the other side of the line, Ukrainians living under separatist control regularly complain of being abandoned by Kyiv. When eventually Kyiv is able to restore full control over the east, there is a serious risk that the several million residents in the whole of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts will have become a strong anti-centre political force. The needs of another important constituency also must be considered. Incompetence, neglect and corruption in the military high command, both military and civilian, may well turn a large pool of angry, militant and articulate critics of Poroshenko – active duty and demobilised troops – into a force that could prove even more of a threat to Kyiv.

This does not detract from Russia's responsibility for the situation. Moscow denies, against all evidence, that it is a major actor – and the main initiator – of the present crisis. It should pressure its separatist allies to support serious efforts to defuse the situation. And while many western analysts and diplomats seem increasingly to view a frozen conflict in the east as the least bad option, even this will be impossible without firm action to increase the distance between opposing front lines and address humanitarian problems.

Kyiv/Brussels, 18 July 2016

Appendix A: Map of the Line of Separation

