

STAY OR LEAVE?

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Introduction

Rumours have been heard that Putin is searching for an honourable solution for eastern Ukraine. The political commanders at the Red Square supposedly discovered that the developments in the Donbas are not in favour of Putin's desired re-election. A painless military solution is no longer possible because of the exponential growth in strength of the Ukrainian military due to support of the West. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, told the world that, "*Military force will not solve the problems of the Donbas. [...] No one wants a war with Ukraine.*" Quoted from MINSK II, this text raises the question why Putin and his paladins took each opportunity to boost the motivation and fighting force of the Donbas' proxy military forces in the previous months. Does Moscow no longer consider the occupied regions as a part of the Ukraine?

Ukrainian military force

Three years ago, the powerless state of the Ukrainian military force was feared for but the sanctions from the West and the strong Russian involvement in the Middle East crisis have been the salvation of the neglected Ukrainian military force. Kiev got the time and space to improve on its fighting force and to model the domestic borders to its own insight.

In 2014, the status of the army so was pitiful that the invading Russian proxy forces were only stopped and repulsed by the support of paramilitary structures. As the main fighting force of Ukraine, these hastily founded structures fought a heavy fight against the hordes that Russia sent. Not soldiers but common citizens succeeded in neutralising the threat of Kiev and the Crimea and maintaining the fragile status quo in the east of the country – with moderate success – for almost three years.

The majority of the combat is carried out over a distance of 250 kilometres from strengthened placings and buried positions. It is a *déjà vu* of the Western front during the First World War. The fighting power that is developed in this defence system has been improved with much-needed support from the West. The meagre number of 4,000 trained and qualified soldiers of 2014 has grown into an army of 250,000 tough, tactical and well-trained soldiers, supported by 80,000 volunteers organized into motivated paramilitary battalions. This mass of people is strengthened by 2,800 MBR's (for comparison: there are 423 French, 407 British and 408 German MBT's). The Ukrainian army has 625 *Multiple Rocket Launchers* (MLRS) at its disposal, and again a comparison can be made: there are 44 French, 42 British and German MLRS' sⁱ. The defence budget has been increased to 6% of the GNP, or €6 billion, and the current government plans to raise this to 10% GNP.

Additionally, the American congress agreed with the supply of defence weapon systems such as the *Javelin* anti-tank system and the *Stinger* air-defence missile.



RQ 11 Raven UAV. Foto: http://olive-drab.com/idphoto/id_photos_uav_rq11.php



Stinger Air Defense Missile System: Foto: <https://www.armyrecognition.com>



FGM 148-Javelin Anti Tank system.
Foto: <https://i.ytimg.com>

Russia still has an overwhelmingly advantage as far as aerial platforms and MBT's are concerned, should a confrontation take place. Beefing up the Ukrainian Regular Army may be delayed because the American president does not want to worsen the USA's already bad relation with Moscow. In spite of this, they started delivering the artillery location radars and a limited number of *Raven* reconnaissance drones.



De situatie in 1991 (T72 tanks Goed voor de sloop)



De nieuwe in Oekraïne gefabriceerde Oplot tank (Een opgewaardeerde versie van de Russische T80, die in bescheiden aantallen is ingestroomd)



LO T80, gemodificeerd en verbeterd



SP 152: self Propelled art 152mm ook wel 253 (Akatsiya) genoemd

Since the weapon arsenal contains too much outdated material, the budget raise would certainly be no luxury; *Kalashnikov* rifles date from the 70s! Medical transport and first echelons medical care are a

disaster. Besides the first echelons treatment given by volunteers on the spot, there are barely any places for injured soldiers - the wounded can only be transported to local hospitals for treatment.

Maps are often outdated paper versions. If soldiers want to have a digital version, they have to purchase it themselves¹. Body armour and night goggles are scarce as are battle rations and fresh bottled drinking water. Furthermore, the Ukrainian army is still eroded by corruption from within².

In addition to the military's abovementioned strengths and weaknesses, is the solid will of the average Ukrainian to fend off new recruitment by leaders from Moscow. Highly motivated volunteers get together each weekend to improve their military skills and raise their operational experience. After three years of civil war, the population learned how to prevent itself better against the Russian hybrid war model. American instructors in *Yavoriv* learned a lot from the experience of their Ukrainian students in this kind of *small wars*³. A new eruption of violence and a step forward in the Donbas by the present militias will therefore not just take into account the soldiers in the 250 km long frontline, but will also take into account the thousands of tightly organized partisan units in the area between the Donbas and the *Dnjepr-Kakhovka* reservoir. The small proxy armies in the Donbas are confronted with a considerable fighting force which excludes a painless and fast march towards the *Dnjepr*. These conditions and adjustments of the Donbas' combat area will, like in Ypres in 1917, result in a high amount of casualties.

Although the Ukrainian army cannot compete with the Russian army, Moscow realizes that continuing a policy with violence as the starting point, will result in an armed conflict in the near future, of which the result is unpredictable. An unappealing prospect for Moscow.

No military solution? What happens next?



**Putin, the strong man.
Photo: Euromaidan.com**

Putin supposedly missed the opportunity to go forward from the Donbas and now sees his chances to quickly strengthen his grip on Kiev and the

Crimea dwindle. He is currently confronted with a growing domestic unrest and a strong opposition against his expansion activities in Belarus. An exception is a stronger Ukrainian resistance on the Donbas combat area. In both cases, the average Russian and Belarus' citizen seem to be done with Putin's power play. As a result, his image of a strong patriotically, determined leader and top class strategist is eroding.

What did Lavrov, Putin's most important spokesperson, mean when he said "*there is no military solution for Eastern Ukraine*"? Is Moscow planning to reduce its support to the proxy armies in the Donbas or to stop it completely? Would not such a decision diminish

Russia's prestige on the international stage? To leave the Donbas would mean a loss of face and would hurt his image as the "Karpov of the Red Square". It would also mean the imminent end of the two proxy republics and their leaders Zakharchenko (DPR) and Plotnicky (LPR). Will Moscow finally execute the MINSK II agreement? A lot of questions and no answers yet.

The pressure remains on the Donbas Basin.

One thing is certain: despite what Moscow tried to say through Lavrov, loss of face is the last thing Putin could use under the current conditions. Perhaps this is meant to give Putin time to turn things to his advantage in Russia and neighboring countries such as Belarus and Georgia. The Russian pressure on the Ukraine will supposedly be maintained. Moscow will not reduce its support to the two small Donbas republics; provocations will keep happening at the artificially drawn boundaries. An aggressive event coming from the Ukraine taking place before the Russian presidential elections in 2018 would suit Putin just fine. This will give him arguments for a violent response to repair the damage.

If Moscow withdraws from the Donbas to get Trump onboard, in spite of the negative effects for Putin, an opening is created for Moscow to negotiate some matters in its own favor. Sanctions and Western repair payments for the reconstruction of the societal and infra structure of the Donbas will without a doubt be important agenda items. The question is whether Putin can exclude the Crimea from the negotiations. Giving up the Crimea would have a devastating effect on the moral of the Russian people and a major influence on Putin's fall.

A prolonged Guessing Game?

Putin has a different view on reality than the majority of western Politicians. Therefore future developments should be approached with caution and monitored intensively. The prediction has not been materialized that Moscow may exploit the grand scale exercise ZAPAD 2017 on Belarusian territory! Yet! Because the western hope that Moscow will leave the eastern Ukraine, is a false one. The Donbas serves ample opportunities for Putin such as a power projection platform for an offensive to the *Dnepr* as well as the creation of *Novorossyia*, as a pledge to get better results at coming negotiations about the future of the Donbas or to mitigate western sanctions. He will not drop the Donbas without a brutal fight.

¹ A similar situation exists in the Dutch Army. Despite an army from a far more wealthy country, the soldiers often have to buy their own, more better equipment.

² Only half of the \$500 million that the NOD made available is spend, the other half is “pending”.

³ Sir Charles Callwell (1859-1928), British-Irish writer, philosopher, intelligence expert and talented language artist. Author of *“Small Wars”* (1896) and *“Military Operations and Maritime Preponderance”* (1905), described this almost a century ago as *“The conduct of small wars is in fact in certain respects an art by itself, diverging widely from what is adapted to the conditions of regular warfare, but not so widely that there are not in all its branches points which permit comparisons to be established.”*