

**Forum:** Security Council  
**Issue:** The conflict in the Donbass  
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**Position:** President

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## Introduction

The ongoing conflict in the Donbass region, comprised of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts of Ukraine, dates back to March 2014. Following the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the separatist movement spread and pro-Russian protests began in East Ukraine. The insurgent groups seized local government buildings and started taking de facto control of the region, to which Ukraine responded with military action. The unrest later evolved into an armed dispute between the Ukrainian government and the self-declared states Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), which hold their claims on the territory based on internationally unrecognized referendums.

Russian intervention to the issue has also been a controversial matter that further escalated tension. Alongside other military support to the separatist groups, the Russian Federation has performed several border incursions against Ukrainian forces. While the Russian

government justifies its involvement in the issue as a defender of the Russian-speaking population in the Donbass, the Ukrainian government describes these events as invasions of their territory.

The war has given rise to high casualties of both military personnel and civilians. It has been briefly interrupted by several ceasefires within the past three years, all of which have been broken. After a seemingly calm period, heavy fighting was once again initiated, leading to the Battle of Avdiivka in the Donetsk region.

While tackling this issue, delegates of the Security Council should address the fundamental question of designating the legitimate body of people who have the right of self-determination on the outcomes of territorial conflicts. In this case, it is a matter of whether the will of the Ukrainian population as a whole or that of the population in the Donbass region must be recognized. As this currently remains ambiguous, both sides have the ability to justify their actions by claiming that they fulfill the people's will.

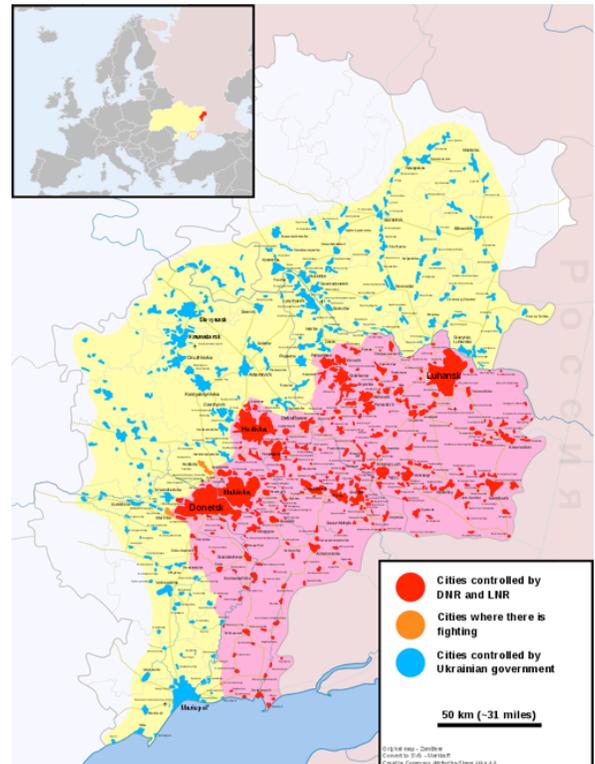


Fig. 1: Map of the War in Donbass

## Definition of Key Terms

**Donbass:** This is a region in East Ukraine, containing the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. The majority of the population here is ethnically Russian and has Russian as native language, forming the basis of Russia's claims on the territory. It is the “*coal-mining, heavy-industry heart of eastern Ukraine*” (Lees).

**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE):** This is a regional security organization aiming for “*stability, peace, and democracy [...] through political dialogue*” (“Who”). In March 2014, it has deployed a Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine, comprised of unarmed civilian officials. OSCE has designated the mission's main tasks as observing and reporting “*in an impartial and objective way on the situation in Ukraine,*” and facilitating dialogue (“OSCE”).

**Decentralization:** This refers to “*taking into account peculiarities of particular districts*”, in this case, of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, “*agreed with representatives of these districts*” (“Minsk Agreement”).

**Oblast:** An oblast is “*an administrative territorial division*” within the Russian Federation and other republics of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine (“Oblast”).

**Annexation:** Annexation occurs when a smaller piece of land is joined to a larger one. It is “*a formal act whereby a state proclaims its sovereignty over territory hitherto outside its domain. Unlike cession, whereby territory is given or sold through treaty, annexation is a unilateral act made effective by actual possession and legitimized by general recognition*” (“Annexation”).

**Self-determination:** In 1945, the Charter of the United Nations introduced the concept of self-determination into the international law, which refers to “*the determination by the people of a territorial unit of their own future political status*” (“Self-Determination”). It “*denotes the legal right of people to decide their own destiny in the international order*” (“Self-Determination”). DPR and LPR embrace this principle, as they ground their legitimacy upon the controversial referendum they held in May 2014.

**Insurgency:** Insurgency is a rebellion against authority. It is “*a condition of revolt against a government that is less than an organized revolution and that is not recognized as belligerency,*” meaning that an insurgency does not occur in a hostile manner (i.e. engaging in combat) (“Insurgency”).

## General Overview

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has been under the influence of both the European Union (EU) in the west and Russia in the east. The population is likewise distributed, causing a divide between the pro-European west and the pro-Russian east consisting of a significant population of ethnic Russian minority and Ukrainians with Russian as their native language. Therefore, instability in Ukraine since 2014 should be considered as an insurgency within the country, but also,

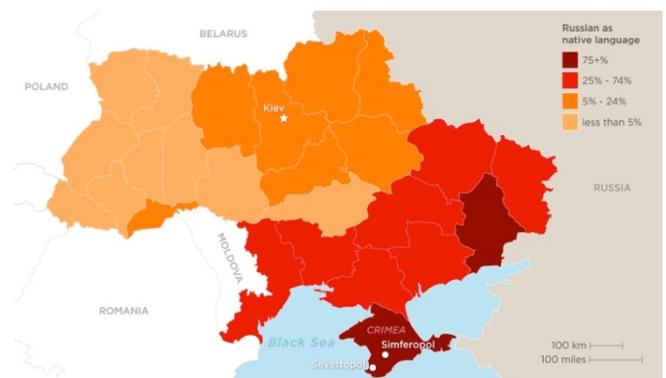


Fig. 2: Distribution of Population with Russian as Native

in the grand scheme of things, as a dispute between the European Union and the Russian Federation.

### **The Ukrainian Revolution and the Aftermath**

As a result of then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich suspending talks with the European Union on a political and trade deal, the Euromaidan protests supporting closer ties with the EU began on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013. After months of escalating unrest with a high death toll, Yanukovich fled Kiev on February 2014. As a result, the President was removed from power and protesters took control of presidential administration buildings, marking the Ukrainian revolution of 2014. In the aftermath of the revolution, a pro-Western interim government was formed, which was followed by the election of a pro-Western President into office.

These changes to the political stance of the Ukrainian government disturbed the Russian Federation and its advocates in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. Russia entered the southern autonomous region of Crimea with military intervention, and pursued its claims of being justified to do so based on a referendum that is viewed as illegitimate by the majority of the international community. On March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Crimea was completely annexed by Russia, further bolstering the pro-Russian protests in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts of East Ukraine, together referred to as the Donbass region. Within the same month, the OSCE SSM was deployed in Ukraine and continuously issued reports on the conflict in the Donbas for the following 3 years. By April 7<sup>th</sup>, the Russia-backed separatist forces had occupied government buildings and initiated their de facto control over eastern Ukraine. The Kiev government responded to these by launching the first formal military operation against the separatist groups in Donbass on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014 (Thompson). However, the actions of Ukrainian forces within the region sparked controversy due to the high death toll. Violence further escalated as a result of mutual provocations and reached a concerning level, leaving a high number of both civilians and combatants dead ("Ukraine"). Throughout the conflict, Russia provided military personnel and artillery to the rebels. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, local militia held unrecognized referendums in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The majority voted for independence, and thus the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) were declared. These self-declared states were not recognized by most countries, and were subjected to allegations for violent actions such as shooting down the Malaysia Airlines flight (Buchanan). In August, Russian humanitarian convoy entered Luhansk without permission, and allegedly delivered military personnel and artillery. Russia also deployed troops on its Ukrainian border and exercised incursions against Ukraine. Consequently, the US and EU implemented sanctions against Russia, especially on oil trade ("Ukraine").

### **The Minsk Ceasefires**

On 5<sup>th</sup> September 2014, the first Minsk Protocol ceasefire was signed between Ukraine, Russia, DPR, and LPR, which established a buffer zone between territories controlled by the Ukrainian government and by separatists. The agreement, however, did not prevent violations for which either side accused the other. In

November 2014, a Russian *“convoy of 32 tanks, 16 howitzer cannons, and 30 trucks of troops, and equipment crossed the border into the rebel-controlled Luhansk region”* (“Russia”). The agreement had completely collapsed by January 2015 due to heavy fighting such as the battle at the Donetsk airport. In February 2015, the second round of peace talks were held between Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany (Buchanan). While the US stated that it considered *“supplying lethal aid to Ukraine,”* European countries were against arming the Ukrainian government’s forces as they feared to further ignite the conflict that had already left more than 5000 dead – including both soldiers and civilians – (Thompson). Germany and France especially assumed crucial roles as brokers during the negotiation process. On February 12<sup>th</sup>, the Minsk II ceasefire was reached; however, it was once again violated when separatist forces launched an operation to regain Debaltseve and forced Ukrainian forces to withdraw from it (Lees). The ceasefire was further infringed when the Ukrainian military stated that it would not withdraw its heavy weaponry as agreed upon in the Minsk II agreement, *“due to continued artillery and rocket fire from pro-Russian forces against targets in eastern and southeastern Ukraine, in particular Mariupol”* (“The”). In April 2015, Ukrainian and Russian foreign ministers agreed upon the withdrawal of more forces from the battle zone. However, *“a group of 300 US paratroopers arrived in Ukraine to train with Ukrainian national guard units”* (Lees). Moreover, it was reported that Russia was increasing troop presence on the Ukrainian border (“The”). The relations between the European Union and Russia remained tense, and the EU extended sanctions against Russia on 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 2015 (Thompson).

## **2016 – Today**

According to the UN, by 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2016, more than 9500 people had been killed, *“including Ukrainian armed forces, civilians, and members of armed groups”* (Thompson). In July, *“after months of relative calm both sides intensified exchanges of fire, including the use of heavy artillery, along the entire demarcation line”* (Wilk). On 5<sup>th</sup> August, 2016, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) also warned about the significant increase in civilian casualties (Thompson).

Another ceasefire was made on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2016, but was once again not fulfilled (“No End”). On December 1<sup>st</sup>, Ukraine launched missiles near Crimea during military exercises, which Russia claimed to be a violation of international agreements (Thompson). This was also violated on 18<sup>th</sup> December, when the Ukrainian Armed Forces launched attacks against DPR militia, and intense fighting continued (“Ukrainian”). The tenth and latest ceasefire was agreed upon on 24<sup>th</sup> December, which was, again, violated with renewed fighting in the city of Avdiivka, leaving again numerous civilians dead. The city was subject to intense shelling (Gigova), while the Russian Investigative Committee accused Ukraine of using Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) against civilians. Moreover, more than 1000 Donbass residents loyal to DPR have protested against OSCE observers for concealing Kiev’s crimes against the people (“Donbass”).

## **Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

## **Ukraine**

The Ukrainian government views DPR and LPR militias as terrorists, and deploys its armed forces in East Ukraine to fight against separatists. It naturally does not recognize DPR and LPR as legitimate states, and supports unity within the Ukrainian territory. The Kiev government currently aligns with Europe and has positioned itself against Russia, following the annexation of Crimea and the Russian support of separatist militia. Ukraine's persistence in maintaining the Donbass region under control has an economic aspect alongside a political one, as it is the coal-mining center of the country (Lees). Although Ukraine is mostly supported by Western countries in this conflict, it faces criticism for the controversial level of violence used by Ukrainian armed forces.

## **Russian Federation**

The Russian Federation backs the DPR and LPR with soldiers and military equipment. Its armed forces have also engaged in clashes with Ukrainian forces alongside the Ukrainian-Russian border, and the government has faced criticism in the past for refusing to withdraw its troops from the border. It also faced sanctions by the EU and the US throughout the course of the conflict; however, currently the tensions are less severe. Russia justifies its intervention to the conflict as a protection of the Russian-speaking community within the Donbass, and claims that it is fulfilling the will of the Donbass residents by assisting them in gaining independence.

## **United States of America**

The United States of America, alongside Europe, has backed Ukraine throughout the course of the conflict. It has provided both lethal and non-lethal aid, and US troops have also provided military trainings to Ukrainian infantry. Recently, however, the US policy against the conflict has become more ambiguous. The newly elected President Trump has signaled better relations with Vladimir Putin; however, the recent battle in Avdiivka has made it unlikely that such relations can be established under the circumstances.

## **France**

Alongside Germany, France has been the primary broker of the Minsk II. It has opposed military assistance to either side, concerned that the further escalation of tensions would cause harms globally. As a part of the EU, it sides with Ukraine on the conflict in the Donbass, while also supporting peace.

## **European Union**

The EU has supported a pro-European government in Ukraine ever since the beginning of the conflict. It began imposing sanctions on Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and extended the sanctions when Russia deployed troops on the Ukrainian border. The EU supports the implementation of the Minsk agreements and asks for commitment by both sides to their obligations in resolving the issue.

## Timeline of Events

<b>21 November 2013</b>	Beginning of Euromaidan protests
<b>22 February 2014</b>	Viktor Yanukovych removed from power
<b>18 March 2014</b>	Annexation of Crimea by Russia
<b>7 April</b>	Pro-Russian protesters seized government buildings in the east Ukrainian cities of Donetsk and Luhansk.
<b>15 April 2014</b>	First formal military action by Ukraine against rebels in the Donbass
<b>11 May 2014</b>	Self-declaration of independence of DPR and LPR based upon unrecognized referendums
<b>5 September 2014</b>	Minsk Protocol ceasefire signed
<b>12 February 2015</b>	Minsk II ceasefire signed after the violation of the previous
<b>22 June 2015</b>	EU sanctions against Russia extended
<b>1 September 2016</b>	Ceasefire signed after the violation of the previous
<b>24 December 2016</b>	Ceasefire signed after the violation of the previous
<b>29 January – 4 February 2014</b>	Battle of Avdiivka

## UN Involvement

The OHCHR reports the humanitarian situation and the human rights violations within the Donbass region (“After”).

The issue has been debated in the Security Council and General Assembly several times; however, decisions have rarely been reached.

## Relevant UN Documents

Condemning the downing of Malaysia Airline flight 17 and calling for an investigation of the crash, 21 July 2014 (S/RES/2166)

Endorsing the “Package of measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements,” 17 February 2015 (S/RES/2202)

## Treaties and Events

The Minsk Protocol, signed on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2014, was an agreement between Ukraine, Russia, and pro-Russian separatists of DPR and LPR. The articles of the agreement were to ensure a bilateral ceasefire monitored by the OSCE, the permanent monitoring of the Ukrainian-Russian border by the OSCE, the release of all hostages and illegally held detainees, decentralization, local elections, withdrawal of illegal

armed groups, political dialogue, improvement in the humanitarian situation, and economic recovery. It was violated shortly after being signed (“Minsk”).

The Minsk II agreement, signed on 12 February 2015, was a ceasefire agreed upon by Ukraine, Russia, France, Germany, and pro-Russian separatists of DPR and LPR. It called for a ceasefire in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, the withdrawal of heavy weapons by both sides, the creation of a security zone, the assistance of and monitoring by OSCE, the pardoning and amnesty of individuals in relation to certain events, the release of all hostages and illegally held detainees, the safe access, delivery, storage, and distribution of humanitarian aid, the restoration of Ukrainian government control over the state border to Russia, the withdrawal of all foreign military support, and a constitutional reform in Ukraine focusing on decentralization (“Minsk Agreement”).

## **Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

There have been more than ten attempts to reach ceasefire, all of which have failed. The United Nations has put forth numerous resolutions, most of which have either failed or got vetoed by a Member State. This is because neither of the solutions were sustainable; they were mostly temporary actions that relieved tensions for a short period of time. It is crucial to address the core problems of devising a sustainable model of life in the Donbass region, and it is important that both side compromises. Otherwise, consensus can only be reached on trivial matters, which have proved to be ineffective within the last 3 years.

## **Possible Solutions**

One course of action to be taken by Ukraine and its supporters could be adopting a milder approach by the Ukrainian government against separatist groups within the Donbass region. The root of their unrest was their demand for further rights about their culture and native language. If the government were to compromise on such matter, a certain portion of the militia could be deterred to pursue their fight. These rebels also face significant economic challenges. A promise on that matter could also be an incentive to drop arms.

Another course of action to be taken by Russia could be reducing its military presence in the Donbass region in exchange for more independence for the currently unrecognized self-declared states of DPR and LPR. This could be autonomy or another political status.

Another matter to be addressed is a more principal and judicial one; it is the question of which group of people is the legitimate holder of the right of self-determination on the territory. The population is distributed rather heterogeneously: ethnic Russians and Ukrainians supporting Russia are mostly resided in the eastern regions of the country, whereas those in the west mostly support the establishment of closer ties with the EU and the existence of the Donbass region within Ukraine. Therefore, the people’s will from

a holistic view and a local view are highly different, one calling for unity and the other for separation. The question of which claim is valid arises at this point, and as this currently remains ambiguous, both sides have the ability to justify their actions by claiming that they fulfill the people's will. A consensus on this issue would be very difficult to reach in the Security Council; however, this could be a crucial topic of debate.

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