March 1 - 12, 16 - 18: Ukraine’s military reported intermittent separatist mortar fire east of the strategic port city of Mariupol. Russian-backed separatists targeted an increased number of Ukrainian positions and shelled at least seven villages in the area from March 1 - 2. Separatists fired an infantry fighting vehicle (IFV) on Ukrainian positions east of Mariupol on March 2.

March 2 - 5, 14 - 18: Ukrainian mechanized forces repelled a separatist sabotage reconnaissance group backed by armor along the strategic Donetsk-Maripol highway. March 2: Separatists fired mortars and an infantry fighting vehicle on Ukrainian forces east of the highway from March 4 - 5. Separatists from the “DNR People’s Republic” (DNR) fired tank, infantry fighting vehicle and armored personnel carrier mortars on Ukrainian positions near the highway March 14 - 18, with a clash occurring on March 15.

March 3 - 13: Separatists launched almost daily mortar fire on Ukrainian front line positions west of the occupied city of Donetsk. Ukraine’s military reported coming under fire from separatist “Grad” multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) on March 3. Separatists launched mortar fire and the MLRS strikes against the government-held city of Krasnohorivka and village of Nove, west of “DNR People’s Republic” (DNR) occupied Donetsk airport. Separatists previously launched MLRS strikes west of Donetsk on February 16.

March 4 - 18: Separatists intensified heavy artillery and daily indirect fire attacks on Ukrainian positions in Avdiivka, north of Donetsk city beginning March 4. A separatist sabotage reconnaissance group backed by armor clashed with Ukrainian forces on March 7, and the Ukrainian military repelled another sabotage and reconnaissance group of ten separatists on March 10. Separatist forces launched a heavy artillery attack from March 9-13. Separatists targeted Ukrainian positions with tank fire from March 11, 12 and 16, and infantry fighting vehicle fire on March 11 and 16.

March 8, 10, 13 - 14: Separatists attacked Ukrainian positions along the frontline Donets River north of Luhansk. Three Ukrainian soldiers were KIA and five WIA on March 5 due to separatist attacks and a roadside mine explosion. A group of two separatists clashed with Ukrainian forces along the frontline Donets River on March 10, the site of a previous attempt to overtake a Ukrainian military observation post by fire from separatists on March 8. Separatists fired mortars on Ukrainian positions south of the river on the contested “Bakhmatka” highway in western Luhansk Oblast from March 13 - 14.

March 6-10: Prosecutors held demonstrations in Kyiv, Lviv and Odessa over the detention and continued trial of Ukrainian POW Nadiya Savchenko, jailed in Russia and accused of directing artillery fire at Russian journalists in Luhansk Oblast in 2014. Savchenko faces up to 23 years in prison and announced a dry hunger strike after her trial was delayed on March 3. Prosecutors vandallized the Russian embassy in Kyiv on March 6 and 10, and Russian consulates in Odessa and Lviv on March 9. Leaders from the U.S. and Europe called for Savchenko’s immediate release and drafted a proposed EU sanctions list to demand her return to Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov condemned the vandalism of Russian diplomatic facilities in Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely attempting to leverage his gains in the Syrian Civil War to expand Russia’s freedom of action in the front line of Ukraine. Russia and the separatists began to escalate operations in eastern Ukraine in mid-February, directly coinciding with the implementation of the Syrian cessation of hostilities agreement on February 27 and subsequent drawdown of Russian forces. The Ukrainian military reported a partial withdrawal of heavy artillery and armor groups from the front line and a decrease in clashes with Russian-backed separatist forces, coinciding with Russia’s launch of its air campaign in Syria. Putin again directly linked the two theaters in his March 14 phone call with President Barack Obama on the Russian military drawdown in Syria, stressing “the need for the complete fulfillment of the Minsk Agreements by the Ukrainian authorities.” Russia and its proxies have escalated operations involving re-deployed heavy weapons in eastern Ukraine in February and March in order to set conditions for future operations and to test the levels of escalation the international community is willing to overbear. Russian-backed separatists likely intend to target multiple pressure points in order to stretch Ukrainian forces along the separatists/western front in an attempt to dislodge their intentions about which single position they intend to prioritize.

Specifically, separatists based around Donetsk city, who had concentrated heavy artillery and tank fire on government positions to its west in February, redirected their attacks north of the stronghold in early March. Separatists escalated army tank fire on March 1 – 2. Separatists also launched “Grad” multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), banned from the front line by the “Minsk II” cease-fire agreement, west of Donetsk airport on March 3, and on February 16, showing their intention to escalate the conflict despite the cease-fire. Despite a mid-February withdrawal of separatist forces from a long-contested village east of Mariupol, separatists increased the scope and intensity of indirect fire attacks on Ukrainian positions east and northeast of the strategic port city. The tandem escalation of attacks in close proximity to the Russian-occupied government-controlled city in the region and Donetsk city may increase pressure on the Ukrainian government to make political concessions tied to the “Minsk II” cease-fire agreement, including recognizing the special legal status of occupied Donbas, in an effort to disperse the conflict.

Heightened separatist operations in March are part of a larger trend of escalation since December 2015. Separatists have phased their operations as follows:

A. December 2015; January-March 2016: Separatists seize uncontrolled village of Kominternove, east of Mariupol; separatists increase mortar attacks east of Mariupol

B. February-March 2016: Separatists target frontline government-controlled civilian checkpoints (northeast of Mariupol, south and west of Donetsk city, north of Horlivka)

C. February 16 and March 3, 2016: Separatists launch “Grad” MLRS (northwest of Donetsk city)

D. March 4, 2016: Separatists shift focus of offensive operations from west to north of Donetsk city

The unenforced “Minsk II” cease-fire agreement grants Western leaders an attractive non-military response to limiting Russian aggression through negotiations, supported by strict U.S. and European economic sanctions. The “Minsk II” agreement, however, has allowed Russia to expand its political and military leverage over Ukraine. Russia is a belligerent posing as a mediator and the unenforced “Minsk II” cease-fire agreement grants Western leaders an attractive non-military response to limiting Russian aggression through negotiations, supported by strict U.S. and European economic sanctions.

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