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## All Eyes on Russia as Ukraine Begins Offensive in East

'We Will Shoot Back'

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**Many in the West believe that Russia is behind the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine. Kiev on Tuesday launched an offensive to retake control of the region, but the biggest question still looms: Will Russia invade?**

The last village on Russian territory, located just off the M3 highway where it enters Ukraine on the way from Moscow, is called Amon. Previously, motorists hardly took notice of the settlement and the border behind it was largely symbolic. But times have changed. Lena Mayorova, a nurse, is standing in front of her house and pointing out the positions taken up by Russian soldiers, where troops have dug trenches and hidden machine guns behind mounds of sandbags. A military helicopter is roaring overhead. Mayorova has never before seen such a thing, at least not here.

But the military presence, seven kilometers (4.3 miles) from the border, meets with her approval. She and others in the area believe that "over there, they are facing a civil war and fascist mercenaries are marching in from Kiev." That, at least, is what Mayorova learned from Russian state television.

Her view of the situation is not likely to have changed on Tuesday. Ukrainian troops began moving into the eastern part of the country as part of the "anti-terror operation" Kiev threatened to launch last week. The operation, targeting pro-Russian separatists in the region, had been scheduled to begin on Friday, but Kiev opted to give activists more time to stand down. A new deadline had been established for Monday.

Acting Ukrainian President Oleksander Turchinov said that the operation began on Monday night north of Donetsk. "It will take place in stages, responsibly, in a considered way," he told parliament, according to Reuters. On Tuesday afternoon, Ukrainian forces were reportedly at the airport in Kramatorsk, just outside the city of Sloviansk.

The advance into eastern Ukraine has loomed for days as rhetoric between the West and Russia has become increasingly pointed. The Kremlin, Western military sources said last week, had deployed 10 brigades of up to 4,000 soldiers each on the border with Ukraine, with witnesses reporting several bus convoys bringing soldiers to the border. "But we don't know for sure how many troops are there," one NATO general said. NATO intelligence, he continued, had not been able to identify a command center in the border region. Still, he added, an invasion cannot be ruled out. Either way, he said, the Ukrainian army would not be able to resist an offensive for long.

### **A Further Escalation**

Russia has repeatedly denied that it is mobilizing its forces on the Ukrainian border and dismissed satellite photos released by NATO last week -- designed to prove the contrary -- as being out of date. On Tuesday, Moscow said claims that some Russian troops were in eastern Ukraine were "absurd." Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said he hopes that Kiev has "enough brains" to prevent a further escalation.

But efforts at de-escalation have taken a backseat in recent days. NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen spoke recently of "illegal and illegitimate aggression" perpetrated by Russia and warned against further bolstering the Russian military presence on the Ukrainian border. "My message ... to Russia is: You have a choice," Rasmussen said. The Western alliance said it was prepared to help Kiev defend sites in the country and has pledged the delivery of uniforms, spare parts and aircraft fuel.

The focus of the Ukraine conflict, which began in Kiev before moving to Crimea, is now squarely focused on the eastern part of the country. The front runs east of the Dnieper River, through cities like Kharkiv, Luhansk and Donetsk. As the barricades in Kiev are being dismantled, new ones have been erected here amid demonstrations in favor of annexation to Russia, even if enthusiasm hasn't reached the fever pitch seen in Crimea.

The industrial city of Luhansk lies almost directly on the border with Russia, on the highway to Volgograd, formerly known as Stalingrad. People like Alexei Relke are on the rise these days in Luhansk. The 41-year-old can be found in the occupied local headquarters of the Ukrainian state security agency SBU. He has a Kalashnikov hanging around his neck; by way of greeting he snaps a new clip into place. "I am at war," he says.

Relke has taken charge of several hundred pro-Russian insurgents who have holed up in the state security building. He goes by the alias, "the German," a nickname he brought home with him from southern Germany, where he lived for 16 years, working in construction. Ten additional Kalashnikovs can be found in a wooden crate behind him. But the assault rifles aren't the only weapons Relke has at his disposal and he calmly runs through his inventory, which includes hand grenades, mines and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. He knows how to use them all; he was born in the Soviet Union and served as an officer in the Russian army.

### **'We Will Shoot Back'**

Thus far, he hasn't had to use them. But Relke makes it clear what Ukrainian forces should expect if they come to Luhansk: "If they shoot, we will shoot back," he says.

It was "the German" who triggered the Luhansk insurgency in the first place. He was arrested on April 5, with a Kiev special forces unit forcing its way into his apartment at 4 a.m. and dragging him into custody. The charge? Treason and sabotage. That evening on television, the SBU displayed 300 machine guns, a grenade launcher and several knives that had, they claimed, been confiscated in Relke's flat.

On the same day, secret service agents arrested several dozen additional pro-Russian activists. Relke says the accusations are fictitious, claiming that he merely established a "coordination center" in February with like-minded Luhansk residents "when we saw what was happening in Kiev." Following his arrest, though, Relke's comrades stormed the state security headquarters and forced his release. But that wasn't all: Insurgents were also able to wrest control of the weapons depot at the local secret service headquarters, which explains why Relke is now wearing camouflage and a bullet-proof vest emblazoned with the letters "SBU".

Relke says that would-be insurgents have also crossed into Ukraine from Russia: "Two or three from every city," he claims. The sounds of several hundred followers singing the Russian wartime folksong "Katyusha" can be heard through the window.

When asked about his political aims, Relke quickly loses his confident demeanor. "The people here were so oppressed, you wouldn't believe it," he says and begins speaking about the late February campaign to remove Russian as Ukraine's second official language. He leaves unmentioned the fact that the attempt was ultimately unsuccessful. He then speaks of freedom and democracy; eventually he mentions the idea of a referendum. "We would welcome military support from Russia, but we don't believe it will happen," Relke says. "We will have to do the job alone."

The regional parliament in Luhansk was at first hesitant to support the pro-Russian activists, but then it released a statement offering an amnesty and demanding a countrywide referendum on transforming Ukraine into a federation.

## **A Surprise**

Luhansk, though, is not alone. Activists remain in control of the administration building in the mining city of Donetsk as well. But who gave the order for the operation? "It came as a surprise to us," says Miroslav Rudenko in the 13th floor of the provincial headquarters, where he and other "members of government" are consulting over the next steps that the newly proclaimed "Donetsk Republic" should take.

Hardly any of the current leaders in Donetsk were part of the initial occupation, Rudenko, 31, explains. "The mood wasn't actually quite prepared for an insurgency." But the government's announcement that inefficient mines in the region would be closed, combined with rising fuel prices, quickly changed the mood in the city.

Rudenko is one of the leaders of the People's Militia of Donbass, a well-organized movement; an image of its founder, Pavel Gubarev, is plastered on his T-shirt. Following deposed President Viktor Yanukovich's flight from Kiev, Gubarev proclaimed himself the "people's governor" of Donetsk and was arrested by Ukrainian secret service agents. He is still behind bars; his wife, Yekaterina Gubareva, fled to the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don.

Gubarev's "militia" maintains close contacts with the Eurasian Youth Union, headed by the Moscow ideologue Alexander Dugin. At the end of March, a conversation between him and Yekaterina Gubareva was made public in which the two discussed the strategy that should be followed in Donetsk. In the conversation, Dugin promises Russian support and advises the establishment of citizen defense initiatives in opposition to the "Kiev junta" in addition to the demand for a referendum on Donbass independence. That is exactly the scenario that insurgents are now pursuing.

Nevertheless, the situation here is not as unambiguous as it was on the Crimean Peninsula. According to surveys carried out by the Institute of Social Research in Donetsk, even as the fear of "radical residents of western Ukraine" are widespread and roughly half of those polled are frightened of the government in Kiev, three-quarters reject the occupation of buildings in the region. Half of those surveyed demand more regional rights, but within a sovereign Ukraine. Only one-third are in favor of being annexed by Russia. But nothing changes in Ukraine these days as quickly as the mood of the populace.

## **Demanding Talks**

Last Friday, interim Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk finally took a step that was long overdue: He made a visit to Donetsk. During his stay, he met with Rinat Achmetov, the country's wealthiest oligarch, whose network of companies employs some 300,000 people worldwide. Still, the primary focus of Achmetov's business interests remains heavy industry in the Donbass region. Achmetov was a significant financier of the Party of Regions, the party that propelled

Yanukovych to power, and the new government in Kiev can ill afford to ignore him. A billionaire who shuns the limelight, Achmetov has visited several hotspots in eastern Ukraine in recent weeks, speaking with those occupying administrative buildings and demanding talks with Kiev.

The situation is similar across the region, with the population of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, just as divided as that of Donetsk. "Ten percent at the most are in favor of Russian annexation," says Mayor Hennadiy Kernes, adding that "40 percent are in favor of close cooperation with Russia within a customs union, 30 percent want to become part of the European Union and the rest don't care." Kernes is popular in Kharkiv, primarily because he is seen as having cleaned up the streets and built playgrounds and parks.

Russia had hoped that Kernes would be instrumental in splitting off eastern Ukraine. But he quickly headed for the exits during a February meeting of the separatist movement Ukrainian Front. He knows that a majority of his constituency is opposed to becoming part of President Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Nevertheless, the new Kiev government longs to be rid of the mayor. A long-time Kernes detractor currently heads up the Interior Ministry and has initiated an investigation, meaning that the mayor must travel to the capital on a weekly basis for hearings.

"Everyone who stormed the governor's palace in Kharkiv last week is to be dragged into court, but those who occupied Kiev city hall are now seen as heroes," he says. "That is not a good recipe for rapprochement." Kernes is demanding that access to Russian television, cut off by a Kiev court to the chagrin of many in the east, be restored.

The mayor's primary adversary can be found two kilometers away in the governor's palace on Freedom Square. A massive man, Ihor Baluta was installed by the new government and is protected by a contingent of 250 heavily armed police. His office is still dominated by the smell of smoke, the result of a raid on the building 10 days ago perpetrated by several hundred pro-Russian activists. Baluta's office windows were shattered, bullets hammered into the walls and a fire broke out on the ground floor. Early last week, special forces regained control of the building.

### **Information and Disinformation**

"We have arrested 62 people," Baluta says. "Russians were not among them. But our secret service personnel know that Russians took part in the raid on my headquarters. They were able to get away in time." Later, an advisor to the governor led a tour through the destroyed offices. "The whole thing was controlled and financed by people in the Russian consulate," he says, "but the governor can't be quite that open." Still, proof to back claims of Russian involvement is scant, just as it is for the assertion made by pro-Russian activists that personnel from the private US security firm Greystone were among the special forces troops dispatched by Kiev.

It is almost impossible these days to distinguish information from disinformation; the political camps are irreconcilable and no accusation is beyond the pale. And perhaps the most important question is impossible to answer: Will Russia invade Ukraine?

Even in Moscow, nobody can say for sure, with political analysts enjoying close ties to the Kremlin unsure about the president's intentions. Stanislav Belkovsky, the author of a book critical of Vladimir Putin, wrote in the newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets* that the president has clearly stated what might prevent him from marching into Ukraine: "The introduction of Russian as the country's second official language and the federalization of Ukraine with extensive rights for the regions." Neither condition would be easy for Kiev to fulfil.

Putin, whose popularity ratings shot up to over 82 percent following the annexation of Crimea, has triggered a sense of expectancy among his followers. Were he now to lose Ukraine to the West, he would find himself in the company of predecessors Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, neither of whom have been forgiven by a majority of Russians for sacrificing the country's superpower status.

### **'Controlled Chaos'**

The Kremlin, it is clear, is prepared to do all it can to prevent Ukraine from turning westwards. In recent days, Moscow has been putting its instruments of economic torture on display. Not only did Russia revoke the natural gas rebate for Ukraine once negotiated by the country's toppled president Yanukovich, but it also jacked the price up to \$486 per 1,000 cubic meters. That is roughly \$100 more than Russia's Western European customers pay on average. And from now on, Ukraine will have to pay in advance.

The Kremlin, wrote the Putin-critical newspaper *Vedomosti* last week, is eager to create "controlled chaos." A second step, the paper wrote, would be that of sabotaging Ukraine's presidential elections and promoting the creation of a confederation, with the goal of ultimately paving the way for regions in eastern Ukraine to join Moscow's customs union.

But does Putin still have the forces he has unleashed under control? Last week, a high-ranking Russian official laid claim to the country's "historical right" to territories of the former Soviet Union, including the eastern regions of Kazakhstan.

In response, Kazakhstan immediately recalled its Moscow ambassador for consultations.