Brothers Disunited:
Russia's Use of Military Power in Ukraine

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Following Russia's forcible seizure of Crimea in February-March 2014 and its involvement in destabilizing southeastern Ukraine, much expert commentary has advanced the idea that Moscow's use of military power was rooted in 'hybrid warfare.'[1] This non-Russian concept, which blurs the distinction between war and peace and uses military force in combination with other forces and soft power elements, restricts the scope to examine Russia's use of force in Ukraine.[2] In fact, the 'hybrid warfare' concept is entirely alien to Russian military science and is only discussed by Russian military theorists and specialists in reference to assessing developments in foreign military approaches to warfare.[3]

For example, in March 2014 in an article in Zarubezhnoye Voyennoye Obozreniye, Colonel N. Nikolaev, Candidate of Military Sciences, assessed the 'hybrid' concept specifically in a US context. Nikolaev conceived of this as only concerning the US Joint Staff, while outlining 'hybrid' war as one that blurs classical warfare with the use of rebel forces, guerrillas, Special Forces, and transforms the information space and cyberspace in a new environment of confrontation.[4] On February 19, 2015 an expert conference was hosted in the Moscow offices of Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye, to discuss 'controlled chaos,' or the 'hybrid' aspects of modern warfare. These specialists concluded there was no agreed definition of the term; even using the Russian word traktovki [interpretations], meaning there is simply no agreed or accepted definition.[5]

Since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, numerous Western and Russian analysts have used a number of phrases to try to encapsulate the nature of the conflict, including not only 'hybrid war,' but also 'limited war,' full-spectrum conflict,' new generation warfare,' 'military persuasion, or even 'special war.'[6] In the following analysis of Russia's use of Armed Force in Ukraine, the author avoids pinning these actions to any one or group of labels, and instead assesses these events based upon a study of the actions of the Russian military. In reality, the relatively low-scale commitment of Russian military and security forces in Ukraine provides further evidence of ongoing conventional weakness; despite several years of military transformation and modernization Russia still has only limited deployment and sustainment capabilities to commence and support operations on the country's periphery.

A key determinant of Russian military actions in Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk flowed from Moscow's assessment of these operational environments. In the political calculus in Moscow the key questions were what was the immediate backdrop to Crimea that resulted in a decision to authorize military action to reduce the risk of a coup de main? What was the operational environment in southeastern Ukraine in the spring of 2014, including actions by local separatists, the Ukrainian government and local volunteers, as well as Russia's covert involvement locally? There are evidently competing narratives in both cases in relation to Kyiv, Moscow, the US/NATO and the EU.[7]

These competing narratives fall broadly into the following:

Kyiv – All the destabilizing influences in Donetsk and Luhansk were the result of Moscow's indirect involvement through the mechanism of 'polite people,' as first witnessed in Crimea.[8] Those pushing for autonomy or independence from Kyiv, or those supporting them were labelled as 'terrorist' and the Antiterrorist Operation (ATO) was seen as the natural response.

Moscow – The Russian/Novorossiya narrative portrayed the Euromaidan protests as the precursor to bringing an illegitimate and anti-Russian government to power in Kyiv. Moscow saw the Euromaidan as an anti-Russian revolution in the 'color revolution' mould and had to act defensively in the interests of the Russian state and to protect Russian speakers in Ukraine (pro-Russian elements in Donbas) and protect its interests in Crimea (secure the Black Sea Fleet).[9] Actions in Kyiv raised concern that the regime was pursuing an anti-Russian agenda, contributing to some elements in eastern Ukraine demanding autonomy, with Federal or other pro-separatist solutions; Kyiv sent troops to assert Kyiv's control and the escalation led to Moscow indirectly supporting a legitimate national resistance to Kyiv.

Both sides escalated the conflict, from Kyiv's effort to prosecute the ATO to Moscow's covert aid to separatists. Consequently, the conflict assumed its own internal logic of evolution, with its dialectic of conflict involving action and response. In the context of Moscow's views on 'color revolution' and the risks of Western powers pursuing similar goals in Russia, analysts had long connected such efforts as part of a wider effort to undermine the Russian state.[10] Into this set of competing narratives the US, NATO and EU response was to attempt to isolate Russia diplomatically and inflict graduated damage on its economy, with these governments perceiving the crisis as essentially European, threatening the existing international order, while Moscow regarded the crisis in its Eurasian context.[11]

Russia's Strategic and Operational Advantages on the Eve of Conflict

In any conflict between opposing parties there certain advantages enjoyed by a stronger side prior to onset of operations. Traditionally, Russia and Ukraine have appeared shoulder to shoulder since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, saving for the fluctuating bilateral disputes about trade and energy or the so-called 'color revolution' in 2004 that brought about an unex-

pected outcome for Moscow. When, in February 2014 Russian military hard power was used to dislodge part of Ukrainian territory from the state, Crimea, and the crisis that ensued resulted in destabilization and conflict in eastern Ukraine, many onlookers were tempted to simply compare the relative numerical and hardware strengths of the opposing militaries. Such an approach, simplistic at best, hides the more nuanced and detailed aspects that fed into Moscow's planning for and later involvement in such events. In the analysis that follows throughout this paper, a number Russia's strategic and operational advantages over Ukraine need to be kept in mind, and some of these were intentional concerning developments in Russia's military force structure and military modernization, though other factors fall into the category of coincidence or serendipity.

Some of these factors facilitated the ease with which Russia took Crimea, or the way in which its involvement would later differ in southeastern Ukraine. These are important to identify, and are here briefly outlined:

- The long-standing presence of the Russian Black Sea Fleet HQ in Crimea, from which operation commenced in February 2014;

- Russian basing on the peninsula contributed to an atmosphere of acceptance among the local populace that these were 'friendly' personnel;

- Ukrainian military bases generally located in the western and central parts of the country (see map two), away from the conflict zones, which is a result of Soviet legacy (basing to face NATO in the Cold War);

- Shared language (Russian) as well as the presence of ethnic Russians in Crimea and southeastern Ukraine, or those who might identify themselves along such lines;

- The near total neglect of conducting combined-arms military exercises in the Ukrainian Armed Forces since independence;

- The terrible condition of Ukraine's Armed Forces on the eve of conflict;

- Penetration of the Ukrainian state intelligence apparatus (Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrayiny—SBU, Security Service of Ukraine) by Russian intelligence agencies including GRU (Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye, Russian Military Intelligence), FSB (Федеральная служба безопасности, Federal Security Service), and the SVR (Sluzhba vneshney razvedki, Foreign Intelligence Service);

- Near constant large scale 'snap inspection' military exercises conducted in Russia since 2013, which were easily continued during the crisis and could act as cover for further operations or the pressure Kyiv;

- Russian interest in seeking to 'learn lessons' from previous conflicts such as Georgia in August 2008 and its defense transformation and modernization programs;

- The recent creation in Russia of a Special Operations Forces Command that would develop capabilities more akin to direct combat operations rather than rely on GRU Spetsnaz for their mainly reconnaissance role;

- The heightened combat alert in Russia's Southern Military District linked to providing support for security in the Sochi Winter Olympic Games, February 7-23, 2014;

- Ongoing experiments to develop a rapid reaction force (RRF) capability revolving around elite units and Special Forces, Special Operations Forces, and other niche units: Airborne Forces (Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska–VDV), Naval Infantry, Spetsnaz Brigades (sily spetsialnogo naznachenya,' (special task forces), Special Operations Forces (SOF), and select units of the Ground Forces. These consisted mainly of contract personnel unlike the conventional forces still heavily relying on poorly trained 12-month conscripts. The embryonic RRF structure consisted of 70,000 to 80,000 personnel;

- Russia's information tools and capability to dominate or seize the initiative in the information space to influence events in Ukraine.[12]

Part of the problem in assessing Russia's operation to seize Crimea is that it was so success-ful and therefore never became a shooting war. Nevertheless, the confluence of the above fac-tors and especially both the presence of the Black Sea Fleet HQ and the military's developing RRF allowed rapid deployment by stealth capitalizing on Russian personnel having a 'friendly' status locally narrowed the time to react on the part of Kyiv. Yet, the later deployments including artillery and Motor Rifle Brigades suggest that the ultimate default position envisaged regular combined-arms warfare.

'Limited warfare' in Two Distinctive Theaters:

1. The Operation to Restore Crimea to Russia

Although much of the narrative of events in Russia's operation to restore Crimea, resulting in its formal annexation on March 18, 2014, is relatively easily established, there remain some con-tradictions and inherent problems in relation to the 'start date' for the operation. In early March 2015, President Putin stated in a Russian documentary trailer that he ordered the operation to 'restore' Crimea to Russia following an all-night emergency meeting in the Kremlin that began on February 22, 2014. The medal to decorate participants in the Russian operation 'Liberation of Crimea,' is dated 'February 20' to 'March 18' 2014; in other words, commencing two days before Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych fled Kyiv.[13]

Nonetheless, based upon open source reporting of these events, and knowledge of historical Russian military operations, the author has concluded that these issues reflect various levels of contingency planning. The contingency planning to retake Crimea most likely began in the 1990s over the status of Russia's Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol, refining these at regular inter-vals since this is a strategic asset for Russia. Following the Orange Revolution in Kyiv in 2004,

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such contingency planning would have been stepped up, and mainly conducted by the General Staff. Such contingencies, however, are not to be confused with evidence of willful intent. As the Ukraine crisis unfolded in late 2013, with Moscow arguably surprised by the development of the EU offering an Association Agreement to Kyiv, this is likely to have intensified the planning and formulation of intervention scenarios to protect Russia's interests; in other words the contingencies were being narrowed and refined into possible options.[14] Yanukovych's decision to eschew the EU association agreement in favor of a counter-offer from Moscow sparked popular protests in Kyiv in November 2013, which continued over winter. These protests, known as 'EuroMaidan' were seen by Moscow as a mortal threat to the Yanukovych regime, and following suppression by the security force and continued protests in February 2014, the president fled and his government collapsed resulting in interim government emerging along pro-Western and deeply anti-Russian lines.[15]

The anti-Russian elements crystalized on February 23, 2014, the same day as the Winter Olympic Games ended in Sochi, with the interim Ukrainian government repealing Russian as an official state language.[16] This arguably alienated the predominately ethnic Russian Crimea, and was seized upon by Moscow to justify its claims to protect ethnic Russian interests in Ukraine.

Russian intelligence penetration, as already noted, of Ukraine's intelligence agencies, implies possible foreknowledge of the collapse of the Yanukovych government. Ukrainian General Staff sources suggested later that they had detected 'unusual' Russian activity in Crimea in January 2014, but that Kyiv had ignored such warnings.[17] Nonetheless, such post-factum claims are difficult to test and even if there was some type of 'unusual' activity' in Crimea as early as January 2014 it does not imply foreknowledge of the collapse of the Yanukovych regime. In this context Putin most likely ordered planning to be intensified on February 20, while only giving final authorization on February 22/3, 2014.

Disposition of Forces in the Crimea

In fact, any effort to establish the chronology of the Crimea Operation depends upon the significant point that the Russians used the Black Sea Fleet Base from which to launch the operation and through which to clandestinely reinforce its presence in the peninsula, before using other locations (see map one above). The fact that Russia's largest foreign military base was located in Crimea permitted such military activity to occur under the guise of 'reinforcement,' and suggests that such an operation would prove impossible to replicate on the territory of a NATO member state. On February 25, 2014, during an extended period of public silence on the crisis by President Putin the Russian foreign ministry stated that it recognized the concerns of the Crimean parliament.[18] Two day later, the Crimean Parliament announced it would hold a referendum to boost its autonomy from Kyiv, scheduling this for May 25, 2014.[19] On February 27, 2014, 'unusual' Russian military activity was reported; with the appearance of masked gunmen in fatigues without insignia who occupied government buildings and set up blockades. This included seizing the parliament in Simferopol with VDV, and Special Forces teams as well as Spetsnaz participating; Marine infantry were also deployed in the peninsula on the same day. The Russian media soon labeled these gunmen as 'polite people,' a phrase which Putin has reportedly liked and so the myth of hybrid warfare operation to take Crimea became a popular label to explain these events.[20]

On February 28, 2014, the masked gunmen increased their control over Crimea with the airport and the state television station placed under pro-Russian control, and this extended to surrounding and blockading military bases.[21] These 'mysterious' forces restricted their activities to surrounding or blockading Ukrainian military bases, except for command and control points and air defense units which were seized to ensure the safety of Russian forces inserted by air. Simultaneously, Moscow ordered 'snap inspection' exercises involving large numbers of its conventional military forces in Western and Southern Military Districts.[22] By the following day, March 1, reportedly 60 percent of Ukrainian Air Defense units in Crimea had been captured, a Spetsnaz brigade arrived in Simferopol and additional Spetsnaz units were inserted by air through Sevastopol. Putin sought parliamentary approval in Moscow for the right to use troops in Ukraine to protect ethnic Russians. The 'polite people' by this stage, had effectively dislodged Ukraine from Crimea.[23]

On March 3, 2014, the Crimean Parliament changed the date of the referendum initially scheduled for May 25, 2014 to March 30, 2014, and on March 6, 2014 moved the date again to March 16, 2014.[24] By March 5, more VDV, Spetsnaz and SOF arrived, and on the following day the Russian Ochakov Kara-class cruiser was scuttled to block exit to Black Sea. By March 9-12 the Ukrainian naval air base at Novofedorovka fell and the 12th Motor Rifle Brigade entered Crimea via Kerch. After the referendum was held on March 16, 2014, with an overwhelmingly pro-Russian majority (the results were disputed internationally), Moscow recognized Crimean independence and began preparing to absorb it into the Russian Federation. Crimea became part of the Russian Federation on March 21, 2014.[25] From March 18 to March 24 Russian forces further consolidated control over the peninsula until Kyiv ordered the evacuation of its remaining forces on March 24, 2014.[26]

By any standards, the Russian military operation to seize Crimea was slick, well planned, conducted professionally and brilliantly executed. What puzzled analysts and governments alike was the fact that it occurred with very little bloodshed --Kyiv made no effort to reassert its control of Crimea. These facts combined with an unusual force mix, rapid deployment accompanied by an information campaign resulted in media focus on 'polite people,' or 'little green men,' and thus the myth of Russian hybrid warfare was reinforced. The case for a Russian 'hybrid' operation cannot be tested since Kyiv never authorized combat operations against Russian forces, which would have revealed what in fact lay behind these deployments.[27] At strategic level, there was nothing new in the operations, the areas of novelty lie at the tactical and operational levels. Indeed, the operation was actually a case of a stronger power exploiting weaknesses of a weaker power during a period of political-military uncertainty caused by the revolution in Kyiv and the need for the interim government there to consolidate its position and establish legitimacy.[28]

In this sense it was the local operational environment, including all the innate advantages enjoyed by the Russian military such as basing rights, that drove and shaped the subsequent operation; using the Black Sea Fleet HQ and other platforms to spread forces out across Crimea as well as to reinforce and add to the deployment, transfer materials, supplies and support the ensuing operation it all hinged on surprise. The Ukrainian military presence in Crimea was 22,000 mainly consisting of Naval personnel, with small number air defense and Interior Ministry personnel. By comparison under the basing terms for the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea, Russia was limited to no more than 25,000 personnel, though the actual number was lower prior to the crisis.[29] The new interim government in Kyiv lacking experience, legitimacy and any opportunity to consolidate its control over Ukraine, found Crimea momentarily isolated and were at a loss to understand what was unfolding. Timing was therefore critical, and from Putin's point of view the timing of the operation could not have been better; finding Kyiv in at best a transition phase, he chose to act decisively.[30]

It is precisely in this context that Russian General Staff planned and executed a rapid deployment of forces into Crimea based mainly on elite and Special Forces mix to take key communications nodes and blockade local Ukrainian military bases, exploiting Kyiv's disarray and its military and security weaknesses. Intelligence gathered in Kyiv and the use of Russian intelligence in Crimea not only afforded Moscow a clearer insight into the capacity of the Ukrainian state to respond, but was also an important element locally in preparing the potential battlefield, with FSB, SVR and GRU involved in stirring up local protests, hiding among the population and conducting reconnaissance and subversive operations.[31]

Ensuring surprise, maximising confusion on the part of the interim government in Kyiv and among local Ukrainian military commanders depended on rapid insertion of forces, with a force

Crimea Referendum and acceptance: Censor.net, http://censor.net.ua/photo_news/277646/ves_tsivilizovannyyi_mir_ne_priznal_referendum_v_krymu_karta, March 23, 2014.

mix and use that fed into the level of enemy confusion. All of these measures were accompanied by an active information campaign, including levels of disinformation to deny Russian military involvement or to mask intentions. The use of the referendum device, as part of the information campaign (see below) was one illustration of how these initiatives played locally, regionally and internationally. The force mix is discussed below, but zeroing in for a moment on the information campaign brings the reader closer to understanding how and why the Ukrainian military never responded to Russian actions.[32]

Moscow's Information Operations

Moscow's information operations were aimed at boosting domestic support for and local acquiescence to its actions over Crimea, while raising doubts internationally about any contradictory narrative. Its use of informational tools seems consistent with the relevant security documents, (Doktrina informatsionnoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Information security doctrine of the Russian Federation]; Kontseptsiia obshchestvennoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Concept for the security of the society of the Russian Federation], Voennaia doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Military doctrine of the Russian Federation]). Yet the campaign locally was clearly aimed at facilitating and complementing the military intervention. These measures were matched with the force mix and rapid deployment in order to maximize command and control advantages over the enemy and ultimately reduce his decision making speed options.[33]

Although there was some advanced military and security activity on the peninsula following the events of February 20-22, from the shooting of protesters in the EuroMaidan to the Ukrainian president's exit, the Moscow-based military analyst Anton Lavrov noted:

The earliest date when the Russian operation is reliably known to have been in progress is February 22. That is the date shown in leaked video footage of an operation by one of the units of the Russian Special Operations Forces. Other special Russian forces are also known to have received their marching orders on February 22-23. The fact that something unusual was going on was quickly picked up by the Russian social networks and regional media outlets. It was reported, for example, that the entire 45th Independent Spetsnaz Regiment of the Airborne Assault Troops (the VDV service) had left its base outside Moscow. Two squads of the 16th Independent Spetsnaz Brigade left their base in Tambov. The 3rd Independent Spetsnaz Brigade in Tolyatti was put on combat alert. Similar orders were received by some units of the VDV service, including the 7th Airborne Assault Division in Novorossiysk, which is not far from Crimea.[34]

Naval Infantry troops from the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Sevastopol), stationed in Crimea as part of the Black Sea Fleet, were important in the initial seizures on February 27-28, probably supported by VDV troops deployed prior to the operation. A Zubr hovercraft deposited troops in Feodosiya on March 1, 2014; they may have included elements of the 184th Coastal Defense Brigade or the 382nd Naval Infantry Battalion (Temryuke).[35] 'Snap inspection' exercises being conducted at the time in Russian military districts provided cover for elements of the 76th VDV Division (Pskov), 7th VDV Division (Novorossiysk), and the 31st VDV Brigade (Ulyanovsk) flown to the Russian airbase at Sevastopol throughout the campaign.[36] One Moscow-based source believes that select elements of five of Russia's seven GRU Spetsnaz brigades, (2nd, 3rd, 10th, 16th, 22nd Spetsnaz Brigades) and one GRU Spetsnaz regiment (25th Spetsnaz Regiment) were also involved in the campaign.[37] Following securing or surrounding critical targets in Crimea, large-scale movements of artillery units took place (291st Artillery Brigade (Maykop),

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and air defense artillery). The confused and rapidly emerging picture on the peninsula, therefore, was that the additional deployments centered on elite and Special Forces personnel.

As the Russian military deployment unfolded, some critical elements that dissuaded Ukrainian military personnel from opening fire were as follows:

- Indecisiveness on the part of the interim government in Kyiv;

- Deployment of highly trained and disciplined Russian units operating under orders not to open fire unless provoked;

- Seizing by Russian units of the local communication nodes and transportation points to reduce contact between Kyiv and Crimea;

- Deploying unusually large numbers of Russian officers in the force contingents who communicated with counterparts at blockaded bases in order to defuse tensions and offer preferential terms for surrender or to join the Russian Army;

- The use of Chechens in the force mix to encourage heightened fear among surrounded personnel;

- Allowing Ukrainian personnel to communicate with their families;

- Use of civilians in the force mix to promote the political protests and moves in the parliament to prepare the 'referendum' to legitimize the Russian action;

- Producing a sense of disorientation and isolation and confusion among Ukrainian military personnel with the use of volunteers from other parts of Russia including boxers, army veterans and even members of the bikers club 'Night Wolves,' adding to the impression of local support;

- Gradually proceeding to cut off the peninsula making any afterthought defense appear forlorn;

- Russian intelligence assessment of enemy capabilities, including numbers of combat ready personnel.

Given these assessments of Ukrainian military weaknesses and the strengths already noted in terms of Russia's forces disposition pre-operation, arguably Kyiv lost Crimea rather than Russia 'winning' it; Moscow's authorization of the operation exploited a unique set of circumstances. The mismatch in the capabilities that either side could bring to the conflict therefore played an important role. The Russian forces looked highly professional and operated in a very disciplined manner, but assessing their performance must be balanced against the significantly weaker condition of the Ukrainian military on the eve of conflict. These reflected the realities of two former Soviet armies with the imbalance stemming from the fact the Russian military had experienced reform and a degree of modernization.[38] An earlier analysis of the Crimea operation concluded:

> In terms of execution, past occurrences of Russian force projection have taken the "sledgehammer" approach, but on this occasion Russia used a scalpel. The Russian troops were well disciplined over the course of the operation. Although they were dressed as irregulars, there were no reports of looting or other activities that could have alienated the population (unlike in other Russian military excursions). The troops exhibited good firearms control, resulting in few fatalities, and by March 22, 2014 the Russian flag had been raised over 189 Ukrainian military units, in addition to other government buildings. There were undoubtedly many tense situations over those few weeks that could have resulted in a limited shooting war. Although, the Ukrainians wanted to avoid bloodshed as much as the Russians, this certainly was not the same military that entered Chechnya in 2000 and fought Georgia in 2008.[39]

2. Southeastern Ukraine

In stark contrast to the Russian military operation in Crimea, Moscow's involvement in desta-bilizing southeastern Ukraine in 2014-15 was different in its approach. After annexing Crimea, the peninsula could no longer be used as a means of Russian leverage over Kyiv, leaving desta-bilizing southeastern Ukraine with the aim of establishing a protectorate. These aims, of course, were subject to change and by the fall of 2014 it was no longer clear that Moscow wanted to achieve a larger protectorate under the banner of Novorossiya and instead scaled back its ambi-tions.[40] Indeed, lacking some of the advantages enjoyed by Russian forces in Crimea the opera-tional environment shaped how carefully the Kremlin maintained 'plausible deniability,' avoided an overt 'invasion,' varied the extent to which it materially supported the rebels, and maintained 'conflict escalation dominance.'[41] Some analysts and commentators suggested that the Russian military was present in very large numbers, which was clearly not the case.[42] The performance of rebel forces in the conflict shows the Russians were there, but not in large numbers—this was driven by quality and not numbers. While much of the commentary on Russian military activities in Ukraine has focused on combat operations, in fact, their primary mission appears to have been to conduct a train and equip program to provide capabilities to the local separatists.

Moscow's adoption of a low-scale 'deniable' conflict, which avoided a larger-scale war mir-rored Kyiv's avoidance throughout the crisis of declaring martial law and de facto war on Russia; President Petro Poroshenko could not declare war on a nuclear power. However, the Kyiv leader-ship underestimated the extent to which local separatist strength existed and quickly took hold in spring 2014 in southeastern Ukraine. As the conflict gathered pace, though direct and indirect Russian Federation support existed, it was relatively small-scale.[43] In other words, the bulk of the 'forces' facing the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2014-15 were home grown. Whether Western governments, Kyiv or analysts of the conflict choose to acknowledge or not, the results had the

hallmarks of a civil war. Although rebel forces in Donetsk and Luhansk regions were eclectic in their origins and frequently in their political aspirations, ranging from foreign mercenaries including Chechens, Ossetians, and Kuban Cossacks, to military veterans and unemployed males of fighting age, the overall structure came to mirror Russian battalion tactical groups (batalyon-nyye takticheskiye gruppy--BTGs).[44] Small numbers of Kazan Tatars were involved, for example, as the diversity of the Donbas volunteers continued to grow.[45] However, the following analysis concentrates on the Russian military components and Moscow's use of military power in theater.

What made Russia's use of military coercion in Crimea appear to some observers as 'hybrid,' was the lack of a combat response from Kyiv and actually much more likely reflecting Russian foreknowledge of Ukrainian capabilities and readiness levels rooted in Russia's penetration of Ukrainian intelligence; which was not repeated in Donbas. Major rebel successes in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were achieved using occasional Russian combined-arms operations sup-

porting local rebels, based upon extensive battlefield preparation by military and civilian intel-
ligence agencies (GRU, FSB, SVR) coupled with training these local forces in such approaches.
Throughout the crisis in southeastern Ukraine, Moscow kept Western governments and Kyiv
guessing as to the nature of its tactics and overall strategic aims by exploiting a range of meas-
ures to both instigate, supply, train and equip local separatists, as well as by inserting some of its
own forces.[46]

Establishing how Moscow conducted its evolving operation to destabilize southeastern
Ukraine, involves analysis of the tactical tools used to achieve these ends. First, the rebel activity
in southeastern Ukraine falls broadly into two phases: first, after Moscow laying the ground-
work for the rebellion in Donbas, the ATO conducted in response by Kyiv's military and security
forces essentially ran aground after the 'rebel' success at Ilovaysk in August 2014.[47] A strategic
stalemate ensued, rooted in Moscow's discontentment with the Minsk One agreement and pro-
tocol (September 4 and September 19, 2014) until mid-January 2015. In the second phase in
January 2015, the ill-fated Ukrainian government effort to take Donetsk airport was followed by
significant rebel advances to the fall of Debaltseve in February 2015 --shortly after the conclu-
sion of the Minsk Two agreement. Both ceasefires proved to be shaky, with scepticism among
Russian experts that Minsk Two could be implemented in full.[48]

In support of Moscow's implied strategic threat of using larger-scale military power in south-
eastern Ukraine, there were also intermittent joint military exercises, which appeared to rehearse
a 'peacekeeping' intervention in a neighboring country.[49] This might have been used by Moscow
on legal grounds in terms of protecting Russian-speaking civilians in Ukraine. In any case, even
within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), major exercises offer evidence that
Moscow was developing such contingency planning for larger-scale intervention despite the
potential difficulties surrounding any move to deploy CSTO peacekeepers beyond the territo-

ries of member states (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan).[50] It is likely that this served as an opportunity for the VDV to train for possible larger-scale deployment to Ukraine, working closely with allied militaries in the exercises to rehearse working alongside local rebels in Donbas.

For example, Nerushimoye Bratstvo-2014 (Kyrgyzstan) in October and Vzaimodeystviye-2014 (Kazakhstan) in August tested combat and peacekeeping skills of CSTO units. The CSTO exercise in Kazakhstan used a scenario based on rehearsing intervention in a neighboring country, with close similarity to events in Ukraine. VDV commander, Colonel-General Vladimir Shamanov, said the VDV should expect to deploy beyond Russia's borders. VDV Deputy Commander for Peacekeeping Operations and the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, Major-General Aleksandr Vyaznikov, estimated that the formation of peacekeeping forces with over 5,000 personnel had been completed in the VDV. "As of today, besides the 31st Separate Air Assault Brigade, five more peacekeeping battalions—one battalion in each formation—have been formed in the Airborne Troops."[51] This was designed to support, the Ground Forces' 15th Peacekeeping Brigade and the peacekeeping battalion in each naval infantry brigade, providing a large range of such options at the Kremlin's disposal.[52]

Since the focus of the Ukraine crisis shifted from Crimea to southeastern Ukraine in spring 2014, much Western media attention concentrated on what many commentators interpreted to be a new Russian 'hybrid warfare' approach to conflict.[53] However, the concept lacks definition, remains alien to Russian military theory and doctrine and fails to serve as an explanatory model for Russia's mix of hard and soft power in Ukraine. In fact, during two of the most critical points --namely the battle of Ilovaysk in August 2014 and rebel advances in January-February 2015-- it was old-style Russian-led combined-arms force that propelled these rebel advances. Russian military training provided to rebel forces supports the assertion that Moscow never adopted or

used 'hybrid warfare' approaches; military exercises conducted by rebel forces in southeastern Ukraine were for manoeuvre warfare. And the knowledge passed by Russia military trainers to their rebel trainees was shaped by an understanding that the BTG is a superior manoeuvre force in the field compared with Ukrainian deployments of battalions.[54]

That is to say that even if some form of embryonic 'hybrid warfare' approach was under development in the Russian military and security structures, it was quite simply old-style regular combined-arms operations that secured key advances during the campaign. As the Moscow think tank Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) analyst Vasily Kashin noted: 'The military situation in eastern Ukraine became a strategic stalemate after the Ukrainian Army was defeated in the battle of Ilovaysk in August.' The battle, to which Kashin refers, had nothing to do with hybrid warfare. Poroshenko over-relying on possible foreign aid, repeatedly failed to appreciate the buoyant mood in the Russian Armed Forces and Putin's will to use military coercion. The dangers of conflict escalation frequently reappeared, but with Moscow holding all the cards.[55]

Moreover, Moscow consistently used the threat of conflict escalation in the period by staging 'snap inspections' of its conventional Armed Forces throughout the Russian Federation as well as sustaining force build-ups in proximity to the Ukrainian border. It also stepped up tactical and strategic level military exercises in ways that might be interpreted by other actors as preparations for a much larger-scale military intervention in Ukraine.[56] This was frequently combined with exercises of nuclear forces and strategic bomber flights close to NATO airspace, as a signal to other actors to stay out of the conflict. While NATO and Kyiv estimates of the numbers of Russian troops participating in the conflict varied, it seems that the surges and variance in regular troop numbers during critical periods were relatively modest.[57]

Persistent claims concerning Russia's sudden discovery and use of 'hybrid warfare' tactics in southeastern Ukraine stemmed from Moscow utilizing a broad range of soft and hard power approaches, with an overall impact that NATO considered to be below the threshold of Article Five, were it to be replicated against an Alliance member.[58] In this sense, as Moscow questioned the legitimacy of the government in Kyiv, yet recognizing it on numerous occasions at the same time, variously labelled as 'fascist' or 'Nazi,' it pursued a broad mixture of diplomatic, economic, political, informational and military mechanisms. Moscow was also involved at an early stage in fomenting rebellion in Ukraine's east and contrary to its own strict laws on mercenary activity, promoted and facilitated the recruitment of 'volunteers' to boost separatist numbers.[59]

Moscow supported the rebels with materiel, deploying some Russian Ground Forces, and maintained higher-readiness forces close to the Ukrainian border, while maximizing fears in Kyiv of a full-scale Russian military invasion; notably triggered during the first Russian aid convoy to Donbas in August 2014, and inserting moderate numbers of Russian troops. The humanitarian aid convoys also represented psychological operations (PSYOPs) to achieve limited political and strategic ends with minimal forces. However, the threat to deploy Russian 'peacekeepers' remained on the table, and in real terms was far more effective in destabilizing Ukraine than any alleged use of 'hybrid' techniques.[60]

In the aftermath of rebel successes in August 2014, with numerous reports that Moscow had increased the number of its regular troops involved in supporting the separatist Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic (DPR/LPR) campaigns, speculation in Western capitals as to Russia's 'war aims' bordered on guesswork. On August 31, President Putin mooted substantive talks on possible 'statehood' for southeastern Ukraine, noting that the conflict remained 'unpredictable.' Into the mix of tactical devices in use at the time, Moscow added the motif of sending 'humanitarian aid convoys,' in what many saw as a fresh breach of Ukraine's sovereignty.

August 2014 also witnessed the capture of elite Russian VDV personnel in southeastern Ukraine, eliciting the response from Moscow that these servicemen had somehow 'lost' their way.[61]

Despite official denials, there was strong evidence of direct Russian military participation in the conflict zone, as well as materiel support from weapons systems and hardware that could only have come from the Russian military inventory, logistical assistance including fuel and the provision of repair and maintenance for assets in the theater of operations.[62] Yet, the organizational structure and individual makeup of the rebel forces, direct involvement of Russian military personnel and the tactics used in southeastern Ukraine generated considerable uncertainty about the precise objectives of such advances. Maintaining a combined-arms force of between 18,000 to 45,000 troops close to Ukraine's border, intermittently swelling or reducing these numbers, launching surprise 'snap inspections' of the Armed Forces involving up to 150,000 troops in some cases, conducting military exercises that might mask fresh operations in Ukraine, and using humanitarian aid convoys not subject to OSCE, Red Cross or Kyiv's cooperation raised the threat that these could either supply and fuel the conflict or act as a Trojan Horse to insert additional forces and collectively contributed to uncertainty as to the overall objectives of the DPR/LPR.[63]

Rebel advances in late August 2014 and again in January 2015 caused considerable discussion among experts as to the potential 'next moves,' with even Moscow-based commentary speculating on opening a land route between Crimea and Donbas. Speculation about the possible targets for the rebels centered upon Mariupol in order to create this land link, and eliminating Ukrainian forces locally to open a second re-supply route directly from the Russian Federation. Alternatives included: an assault on Volnovakha in order to sever the Ukrainian military link to the Azov group of forces, or, attacking Donetsk and especially securing the airport, Debaltseve, and the Lisichansk-Rubezhnoye-Severodonetsk area, which Ukrainian forces had allegedly fortified, as well as Luhansk and the surrounding areas to deflect pressure on separatist forces.[64]

Shadows on the wall: Russian military involvement in Donbas

While the Kremlin placed 'plausible deniability' at the heart of its use of military power in Ukraine, as the conflict unfolded it became impossible to conceal the extent of Russian military involvement in rebel operations. 'Plausible deniability' therefore transitioned to 'implausible deniability,' with no-one in the Russian power structures seeming to notice or to care. On February 18, 2015, Novaya Gazeta 'identified' a senior Russian general in Debaltseve, which resulted in Russian media trying to quickly explain or dismiss his presence there. Lieutenant-General Aleksandr Lentsov, former deputy commander of the Airborne Forces (VDV) and since July 2013 serving as deputy commander of the Russian Ground Forces, had slipped from public view in late 2014. Russian media reported, on February 19, that a man 'resembling' Lentsov had 'appeared' in Debaltseve. General Lentsov appeared in video footage taken in the town on February 18. "We have identified the man with the face of a Hemingway-style old man, who is standing near Kiselyov, a DPR [self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic] representative. He says: 'We have been shot at. We have been betrayed.' In this text, he absolutely identifies himself with the DPR side. To us, he looks like Lentsov," Novaya Gazeta editor-in-chief, Dmitry Muratov, told Ekho Moskvy. Novaya Gazeta asked the DPR to establish "who is the man that DPR representative Kiselyov looks back at as if he was some senior?" The DPR stated they could not identify the man in the video, but referred to him by a nom-de-guerre, "Yustas" (the nickname of the fictional Soviet spy Stirlitz).[65]

Nevertheless, according to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM), tasked with monitoring the tentative Minsk One-based ceasefire, General Lentsov had been actively involved in the work of the Joint Center for Control and Coordination (JCCC). No-one appeared to question why Moscow would nominate such a high ranking officer and deputy commander of the Ground Forces for such a role, or why his exit from Ukraine was so delayed. Official OSCE statements

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indicate that General Lentsov was replaced in the JCCC in mid-December by Major-General Aleksandr Vyaznikov, deputy commander of the VDV forces for peacekeeping operations and CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Force.[66] General Lenstov's continued presence in the conflict zone in January-February 2015 may well indicate a dual hatted role (heading the Russian representation within the JCCC and advising or directing rebel operations) and this could have shifted to the latter as operations intensified to take Debaltseve. Indeed, on January 21, 2015 the SMM was informed that the Russian military representatives were withdrawing north to Soledar, which also coincided with an intensification of the rebel offensive on Debaltseve.[67] Moreover, the well-conducted encirclement of Debaltseve also implies the presence of an operational HQ for planning and logistics.

However, the main evidence of direct support from the Russian Armed Forces falls into two specific areas: the sophisticated and advanced Russian weapons systems and hardware deployed and used in the theater of military operations and growing unofficial reports in Russian social media of the secret burial of its troops killed in combat. These became known as Gruz 200 (Cargo 200—a Russian military codename for the transportation of causalities in zinc coffins).

Weapons and equipment

Following the rebel seizure of Donetsk airport after months of fighting and an upsurge in clashes in January 2015, NATO again strongly condemned Moscow's active role in the conflict. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg blamed Moscow for the latest upsurge in violence in Ukraine: "For several months we have seen the presence of Russian forces in eastern Ukraine, as well as a substantial increase in Russian heavy equipment such as tanks, artillery and advanced air defense systems. Russian troops in eastern Ukraine are supporting these offensive operations with command and control systems, air defense systems with advanced surface-to-air missiles,

unmanned aerial systems, advanced multiple rocket launcher systems, and electronic warfare

systems." Indeed, it was the presence of sophisticated Russian military systems within the con-

flict zone that offered the clearest evidence of direct Russian support including the use of its

military personnel during rebel operations.[68]

Since Moscow's intervention in Ukraine in February 2014, its military operations made ex-

tensive use of 'plausible deniability.' Despite increasingly frequent sightings of Russian military

hardware in Ukraine, as well as NATO declassifying satellite imagery to support its allegations

against Moscow, the Russian political-military leadership rigidly continued to deny any involve-

ment of the country's Armed Forces, or supplying weapons, military equipment and logistical

assistance to the separatists. Such denials permeated the Russian military press. Illustratively, an

article in late January 2015 in Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye by its editor Oleg Odnoko-

lenko presented views on the conflict predicated on such denial.[69]

Nonetheless, Western intelligence agencies, NATO, and even local eyewitnesses, as well as for-

eign analysts, noted the presence of Russian-manufactured and defense ministry–owned weapons

and equipment appearing on Ukrainian territory. Of course, in any conflict situation there are

competing claims, counter-claims, rumors and propaganda that generates an atmosphere of con-

fused information/disinformation. Some Russian specialists have talked to media outlets in detail

in an effort to respond to what Moscow views as hyperbolic claims made by Kyiv concerning the

level of Russian involvement in the conflict. In March 2015, an anonymous analyst in the Rus-

sian General Staff, denoted as 'a specialist in battle management analysis,' commented at length

to Novaya Gazeta on statements by Ukraine's defense ministry. Among his observations, the

General Staff analyst tried to rebut reports of direct contact between Ukrainian journalists and

serving member of Russia's Armed Forces deployed in southeastern Ukraine. 'Even if our mili-

tary personnel are using unencrypted means of communication, they tune away from the frequen-

cy and do not communicate with any outsiders. In 34 years of service I know of not one instance where the commander of the smallest subunit, coming up in communications with the enemy at his initiative, gave his affiliation on the air, if only even the company number. It is guaranteed he would be discharged the next day.'[70]

The full extent of Russian direct and indirect support to the rebellion and civil war in south-eastern Ukraine cannot be established through open source reporting. In the following analysis, however, some key examples are considered to offer glimpses into the flow of Russian weaponry and hardware across the border. In April 2014, as separatists launched early operations in Donbas, the weapons and equipment appear to have been Soviet relics, with sightings of old T-64 tanks, for instance.[71] As the conflict advanced so too did the level of input from Russia's military inventory. One such example relates to the shelling of Mariupol in January 2015, using Grad and Uragan multiple rocket launcher systems (MRLS). The 2B26 Grads mounted on KAMAZ-5350, in the Russian military inventory, were observed in Donetsk in late January 2015. Also, in late January 2015, footage emerged in the rebel-held town of Shakhtarsk showing two Pantsir-S1 truck-mounted anti-aircraft and surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems—a modification specifically incorporated into the Russian Armed Forces in 2012.[72]

The Russian main battle tank, T-72B3, a modification that entered service in the Russian Ground Forces in 2013, was frequently identified on Ukrainian territory. On September 3, 2014 locals witnessed a convoy of 25 combat vehicles in Luhansk oblast. That convoy included a BTR-80, two main T-72B3 battle tanks, as well as three 'Strela-10' SPGs, mounted on MT-LB tracked vehicles. Later in September 2014, Russian T-72B3 tanks were destroyed near Starobeshevo, while on December 2, 2014, an armored convoy of 20 units passed through Luhansk including six tanks identified as T-72B3s. However, apart from tanks and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), evidence exists in relation to other Russian military hardware, including electronic

warfare (EW) systems, armored vehicles and even sniper and assault rifles.[73]

There is also reliable reporting on the presence of sophisticated Russian military EW systems in southeastern Ukraine. For example, in November 2014, the 1RL257 Krasukha electronic countermeasures (ECM) jammer was used close to the Donetsk National Technical University; this Russian system blocks military aircraft radar and UAV command channels at ranges of up to 300 km. Aistenok portable counter-mortar radars were identified in Donbas. This system was displayed to representatives from the OSCE in Donetsk in January 2015. Its manufacturer, the Tula-based Strela Production Association, says that the Aistenok detects mortar firing positions at up to 5 km and provides trajectory-based artillery fire adjustment up to 15 km.[74]

Numerous different lightly armored vehicles of Russian resonance were identified in Donbas. These included BPM-97 KamAZ-43269 Vystrel/Dozor mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles (Vystrel was designed for use by the Russian Federal Border Guard Service and Dozor for the Army). Approximately ten of these vehicles appeared in Vesti TV footage of 'regular field train-ing' on December 30, 2014 in Luhansk.[75] This platform was cleared for export in 2005, and only a small number were exported—none of which were purchased by Kyiv (Military Review, Janu-ary 9). Moreover, on January 10, 2015, the four-wheel-drive GAZ-3937 Vodnik was seen in local combat operations. Again, this platform has been exported from Russia, but none of the contracts included Ukraine. On January 10, 2015, a video was released showing two BPM-97s during lo-cal insurgent clashes in Krasnodon (Luhansk region). On February 10, 2015 a convoy of Russian vehicles, including three BPM-97s, was also identified in Luhansk. Equally, Tigr-Ms (modern light armored vehicles) have been witnessed in a convoy passing through Ukrainian territory on their way to Luhansk.[76]

In addition to the higher profile Russian military systems deployed in Ukraine, to which NATO repeatedly alluded, including command and control systems, air defense systems with advanced

SAMs, UAVs, MRLS, and EW systems, some of the smaller arms in use also implicate Moscow in the conflict. In December 2014, Ukrainian separatists were reportedly using the KSVK/ASVK Kord sniper rifle, part of the 12.7 mm 6S8 Kord sniper system. The Kord entered use in the Russian military in mid-2013, designed for action against lightly armored and non-armored vehicles at up to 1,000 m and enemy personnel at up to 1,500 m.[77] Ukrainian troops seized examples of these weapons at Donetsk airport on January 14, 2015. Footage of Donetsk separatists in January 2015 reveals the silent and flameless 9-mm AS Val assault rifle, used by Russian Special Forces and the Russian Interior Ministry Troops. These weapons systems and items of military equipment not only come from the Russian military inventory but are also modern and advanced—which places intensive demands on those using such technology, without sufficient training.[78]

These examples of Russian military weapons systems and hardware identified in southeastern Ukraine demonstrate direct support for the rebels, and establish the need for Russian military service personnel to use these assets, train separatists in their use and also to maintain, repair and even supply fuel and spare parts to sustain usage. What began as a disparate collection of rebels and mercenaries, with training and assistance from Moscow, became a much more cohesive military structure. By February 2015, DPR/LPR forces more closely mirrored the brigade-based structure of the Russian Armed Forces, with its main combat elements based upon the use of BTGs in combat operations.[79]

Often the type of military equipment supplied to the separatists, therefore, demanded experienced and well-trained Russian contract personnel in order to use and maximize sending such systems into the conflict zone. One instance, in terms of speciality is the use of snipers; since 2011, Moscow was introducing specialist sniper companies into the table of organization and equipment. Such snipers require specialist and tailored training. Most of the reported Russian weapons and equipment finding its way into Donbas cannot be operated effectively by inexperi-

enced handlers; from a Russian military perspective, such assets demand the presence of contract military personnel --kontraktniki.[80]

Paradoxically, the presence of Russian weapons systems in southeastern Ukraine is also acknowledged in the February 12, 2015 Minsk Two agreement. Part of the text, referring to the procedures for the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the conflict zone, notes the system MLRS 'Tornado-S,' which could only have been on Ukrainian soil at the behest of the Russian Armed Forces.[81]

Many of these Russian systems are sophisticated and way beyond the capacity of inadequately experienced separatists; a significant proportion of this hardware demands specialist military training and cannot be operated properly by amateurs. It implies the presence of Russian kontraktniki from various branches of Russia's Armed Forces, acting in at least training, guidance and mentoring roles to maximize the use of such systems and equipment.

In January 2015, President Poroshenko claimed there were around 9,000 Russian troops in eastern Ukraine; while NATO estimates were somewhat lower—no more than a brigade-strength in total. By early March 2015, NATO estimated up to 12,000 Russian troops were involved, though German intelligence told Der Spiegel that the numbers were much lower.[82]

These were most likely drawn from across a variety of units. And, in the absence of local reporting in the vicinity of Russian military bases about the movement of large numbers of personnel it is likely that kontraktniki military specialists were covertly deployed from numerous units in the VDV and Ground Forces and combat support units such as artillery brigades --but in relatively modest numbers. Artillery fire from Russian territory into the conflict zone was sporadically detected, while actual artillery support during combined-arms operations likely involved direct deployment of units in theater.[83]

While these weapons systems and military hardware provide evidence of Russian involvement in the conflict, necessitating highly trained and skilled servicemen to operate or instruct separatists in their use, various reports point to their presence in the conflict. For example, in the aftermath of the shooting down of MH17 on July 17, 2014, widely attributed to the use of the SA-11 'Buk' SAM system, it is likely that Moscow tightened its grip over which systems were deployed and how they were utilized. Moreover, the need for 'plausible deniability' restricted the available military options. Thus, Moscow could not deploy the Russian Air Force to keep the Ukrainian Air Force from entering the conflict and gaining control of airspace. Consequently, the rebels and Russian regular troops required constant access to and training in the use of portable and more sophisticated air defense systems.

In addition to fuelling the conflict Moscow also effectively field-tested new or modernized weapons systems or equipment in Ukraine. As the British military analyst Keir Giles noted, the Russian military used the Ukraine conflict to test new systems, possibly even to assess how these may perform against NATO forces.[84] While this undoubtedly involved many more items than those cited above, there were also gaps in the public reporting. It is highly likely, for instance, that Moscow field-tested elements of advanced C4ISR in Ukraine; and this would certainly involve automated command and control systems including the high-profile Andromeda-D for the VDV.[85]

Russian military casualties in southeastern Ukraine: Gruz 200

Additional evidence for the direct involvement of the Russian military in operations in Donbas, albeit sporadic and unofficial in its nature, stems from unofficial reporting on Russian fatalities. There are no publicly available reliable figures for the total number of Russian military casualties in Ukraine. In the early stages of the conflict in southeastern Ukraine in the spring of 2014, 'plausible deniability' continued as the sine qua non of the operations. By May 2014, Russian media

suggested that any Russian troops serving in the conflict had simply gone there by mistake.[86]

In late May 2014, reports emerged of the discrete funerals of Russian military personnel killed in the conflict zone. These had allegedly gone to Ukraine without the approval of their unit commanders, and simply taken leave to volunteer to assist their brothers in arms and support the rebellion against 'fascist Kyiv.' Since these early reports of military casualties among Russian military personnel, the official narrative underwent several modifications to account for their presence in Ukraine, but consistently maintained that Moscow had not ordered their official deployment. These explanations varied from soldiers going to the conflict during their 'vacation,' or to VDV servicemen becoming 'lost' in the combat zone.[87]

By the fall of 2014, Russian social media including Vkontakte (Russian equivalent of Facebook) and other social networks were actively reporting on the unofficial fatalities of Russian military personnel in southeastern Ukraine.[88] Some Russian TV channels reported on these secret burials, such as on the funeral of a VDV soldier in late August 2014, though still using the official narrative that he was only there on 'leave,' from his unit.

Similar projects were launched, such as LostIvan, to publicise the plight of Russian military families struggling to gain recognition for their familial losses in combat. Part of the problem that may have contributed to increasing Russian military causalities at this point was the lack of deployed field hospitals; reporting on wounded was even more difficult to come by. Pro-Russian separatist leader and Prime Minister of DPR, Aleksandr Zakharchenko, said in an interview that 3,000-4,000 Russian servicemen were supporting his volunteer units in combating the Ukrainian Army: "Among us are serving soldiers, who would rather take their vacation not on a beach but with us, among brothers, who are fighting for their freedom."[89]

Clearly any military conflict assumes combat losses among the belligerent parties. Since the Kremlin pursued the line in public of 'deniability,' most Russian media including television

channels maintained a near eerie silence on this aspect of the Ukraine conflict. However, through social media there was at least some effort to piece together an account of the numbers and identifies of Russian military personnel missing or killed in action.[90] Admittedly this offers only a partial insight into these issues, and cannot be relied upon to reveal anything near a complete picture. Suffice to observe that the Gruz 200 phenomenon inadvertently confirms the participation in the conflict by regular Russian military servicemen despite official denials.[91]

Table 1: Unofficial reports of Russian military fatalities in Eastern Ukraine: identified units

GROUND TROOPS AND ARTILLERY
• Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) of the 18th Motorized Rifle Brigade, Khankala/Kalinovskaya, Chechnya;
• BTG 17th Motorized Rifle Brigade, Chechnya, Shali;
• 23rd Motorized Rifle Brigade, Samara;
• BTG 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade, Botlikh, Dagestan;
• BTG 205th Motorized Rifle Brigade, Budennovsk, Stavropol Kray;
• BTG 19th Motorized Rifle Brigade, Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia;
• BTG 7th Military Base in Abkhazia;
• BTG 33rd Mountain Motorized Rifle Brigade, Maykop, Adygeya;
• Artillery Task Force Battalion of the 291st Artillery Brigade, Troitskaya, Ingushetia;
• Company Task Force of the 78th Logistics Support Brigade, Budennovsk, Stavropol Kray;
• BTGs and Company Tactical Groups (CTGs) and artillery battalions of the 20th Motorized Rifle Brigade, Volgograd;
• 34th Motorized Rifle Brigade (Mountain), Karachayevo-Cherkesiya;
• Artillery Battalion (Uragan Multiple Rocket Launcher System) 943rd Artillery Regiment, Krasnooktyarbrskoye, Adygeya;
• Artillery Battalion (Tochka-U and Iskander-M) 1st Missile Brigade.

AIRBORNE (VDV)

- BTG/CTG of the 56th Air Assault Brigade, Volgograd;

- BTG 76th Division, Pskov;

- BTG 98th Division, Ivanovo;

- BTG 45th Separate Spetsnaz Regiment, Kubinka (Moscow);

- BTG 247th Regiment of 7th Division, Novorossiysk;

- 106th Division, Tula.

COMPANY TACTICAL GROUPS (CTGs) AND SABOTEUR-RECONNAISSANCE TEAMS (SRTs) OF THE MAIN INTELLIGENCE DIRECTORATE

- 10th Spetsnaz Brigade, Molkino, Krasnodar Kray;

- 22nd Spetsnaz Brigade, Aksay, Rostov Oblast;

- 100th Experimental Reconnaissance Brigade, Mozdok, North Ossetia;

- 346th Spetsnaz Brigade, Prokhladnyy, Kabardino-Balkaria;

- 25th Spetsnaz Regiment, Stavropol;

- 2nd Spetsnaz Brigade, Pskov;

- 16th Spetsnaz Brigade, Tambov;

- 3rd Spetsnaz Brigade, Ulyanovsk.

Source: Live Journal, http://zpolk-org.livejournal.com/, August 26, 2014.

In this context, Table 1 (above) represents a cross-section of the Russian military fatalities and the units from which they were drawn to serve in southeastern Ukraine. The table and its contents by no means offer an exhaustive account of the Russian military personnel and Russian units involved in the Donbas conflict. However, it illustrates the unit types and levels of Russian military deployment in the theater of operations.[92] A number of observations can be made concerning the broader picture of Russia's use of military power in southeastern Ukraine. Unlike in the operation to annex Crimea in February-March 2014, the unit mix was less focused on Special

Forces and elite troops, while both operations were accompanied by strategic deterrence and IW. Russian servicemen were being deployed from BTGs in the Ground Forces, including Motorized Rifle Brigades, Tank Brigades, and with combat support from Artillery Brigades. The elite Airborne Forces were heavily involved with personnel deployed from several key VDV formations. Russian GRU Spetsnaz also featured, and FSB 'Alpha' and 'Vympel' units.[93]

   While military personnel were deployed into the conflict zone from these units it does not mean the entire unit in each or any of these cases would have gone to Ukraine; the vast bulk of the forces on the ground in southeastern Ukraine were local separatists including their ranks swollen by foreign mercenaries (approximately 30,000 in total). Russian military personnel appear to have supported the use of advanced military weapons systems and hardware, demanding the deployment of kontraktniki from among VDV, the Ground Forces and other supporting units. These numbers ebbed and flowed throughout the course of the conflict. It is highly likely that entire artillery battalions were deployed in theater to support rebel operations. VDV personnel seem to feature more among the fatalities than other branches and arms of service, perhaps reflecting their use in theater as lightly armed combat infantry. Among the Spetsnaz and other Special Forces casualties there are also references to small numbers of FSB personnel; these and GRU Spetsnaz were most likely aiding and abetting the separatists by carrying out or training locals in sabotage, reconnaissance and intelligence gathering.[94]

   Such data illustrates how different were the Russian military operations in southeastern Ukraine in contrast to the earlier relatively smooth experience of the operation in Crimea. It is the author's conclusion, therefore, that the operational environment in each case not only differed, but served to shape the nature and options in Moscow's use of military force. That is to say that neither of these operations were driven by innovative concepts such 'hybrid warfare,' or other novelties, but simply shaped by the unique local circumstances involved. Russia's military

role in Donbas was mainly about advisors and senior officers supporting operations and the creation of a de facto rebel army.

Russian Military Capabilities: Crimea and Southeastern Ukraine

Historically, Russia does not engage in military operations without extensive preparation of the battlefield. Although there seems likely to have been contingency plans in Moscow since the 1990s linked to the Black Sea Fleet HQ in Crimea, probably updated following the Orange Revolution in Kyiv in 2004, these needed to be further refined in light of recent Russian military developments.[95] Contingency plans, however, do not equate to a 'pre-determined' intention to act aggressively. As the crisis in Ukraine developed it is entirely plausible that diplomatic, legal and media campaigns were used in this context; forming part of a wider campaign to support military/security operations in Ukraine in order to achieve strategic objectives. That, most likely, harnessed Russian 'reflexive control' theory[96] as part of a deeper information campaign (Information Warfare, IW/Information Operations, IO) to support the overall use of Russia's military power in Ukraine.

This complex operational environment, distinct in Crimea and Donetsk/Luhansk resulted in Moscow carefully conducting operations in both theaters. Moscow's options and actions were therefore shaped by the unique circumstances of the differing operational environments in Crimea and Donbas, and the same methods could not be applied to each theater. However, Moscow's efforts to prepare military operations in each case involved IO focused on reflexive control, designed to influence the enemy and garner domestic support. From this analysis, the following conclusions may be drawn as to Russia's use of military power in Ukraine:

General Russian military capabilities in Crimea and Donbas:

- Limited military power projection: deploying and sustaining up to brigade level and sustaining these forces in the theaters of operations;

- Plausible deniability (used in Crimea until the Kremlin awarded medals to participants);

- Strategic deterrence mixing nuclear and conventional exercises and intensifying strategic bomber flights internationally (deterring Kyiv from escalating as well as other actors from contemplating direct aid/involvement);

- Civilian and military intelligence penetration of Ukrainian defense and security structures;

- Improved command and control;

- Enhanced integration of military and other security forces deployed in theater;

- Use of IW to dominate the information space;

- Effective use of PSYOPS to confuse and influence the morale of enemy forces.

Crimea:

- Utilizing local basing (Sevastopol) to launch early operations and to transfer additional forces and hardware;

- Matching force mix, weapons and equipment to the requirements of the operational environment;

- PSYOPS to confuse, demoralize and influence the enemy officer corps;

- Effective use of local basing from which to launch covert operations and to insert additional forces and hardware.

Donbas:

- In southeastern Ukraine local separatists were used to mask operations to seize territory; training, assisting and supplying local forces to become a viable military capable of resisting Kyiv's forces;

- Training, equipping and supporting rebel forces to create a favourable imbalance vis-à-vis Ukrainian military and security forces;

- DPR/LPR force modelled on brigade-based structure with BTGs for manoeuver warfare to exploit the battalion-based use of force by Kyiv in the ATO;

- Infrequent use of regular combined-arms operations in support of DPR/LPR forces;

- Deploying appropriate military forces and hardware to the correct areas when needed, to mitigate force generation issues;

- Streamlined military logistics system to facilitate transfer of materiel to the conflict zone;

- Experimental testing of military hardware and equipment in the conflict zone (Donbas).

In military terms, Putin's decision to authorize the use of Armed Force in Crimea and later 'implausible deniability' operations in southeastern Ukraine was steeped in caution and choosing options that were relatively low key and allowed control over escalation. Russian operations in these two distinctive theaters differed greatly, guided by the uniqueness of the operational environments. Thus, in both cases the Russian military was used more as a scalpel than sledgehammer in order to reduce the inherent risks of conflict escalation. Putin specifically ordered the use of GRU Spetsnaz, elite VDV units and marine infantry to Crimea under the guise of reinforcing Russian military infrastructure for this very reason.[97] Notwithstanding such caution and deliberate calculation in response to the crisis, Russia's use of military power in Ukraine broke all inter-

national standards and conventions, flouted the sovereignty of its neighbour, challenged European security and effectively marked the end of the post-Cold War international security system. It occurred during a general worsening in US-Russia relations, and given Putin's memory and the Russian security elite's reaction to the events of 1999 with the US/NATO bombing of Belgrade during the Kosovo crisis, it also appears that Putin chose to protect the security of the Russian state by replaying the Kosovo crisis in reverse.[98] The consequences of which will take generations to fully understand or heal the current divides.

END NOTES

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85. 'Разработана концепция развития Общевойсковой академии Вооруженных сил РФ,' Voyenno Promyshlennyy Kuryer, http://vpk-news.ru/news/23853, February 12, 2015; Roger McDermott, 'Russia's Armed Forces Await Automated Command and Control—In 2015,' Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume: 10 Issue: 51, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40617&no_cache=1#.VQCgtvmUdqU, March 19, 2013.

86. One example of Russian kontraktniki wounded in combat and treated in hospital emerged in early March 2015. A Russian kontraktniki, from the 5th Tank Brigade (Ulan-Ude) in Central Military District was treated in a hospital in Donetsk for severe facial and arm burns. During an interview he spoke of extensive training prior to his deployment and later sustaining severe injury on February 8, 2015. See: Елена Костюченко, "Мы все знали, на что идем и что может быть," Novaya Gazeta, http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/67490.html, March 4, 2015.

87. In order to secure official permission to go on leave, Russian military personnel need to apply, disclose details as to the destination of their leave of absence and gain the approval of their commanders. See : Maria Turchenkova, Gruz 200: Continuation, Novaya Gazeta, http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/63873.html, June 2, 2014 ; Andrew Higgins and Michael A. Gordon, "Putin Talks to Ukrainian Leader as Videos Show Captured Russian Soldiers," http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/27/world/europe/ukraine.html, August 26, 2014.

88. Elena Vasilieva created a Facebook page using the phrase Gruz 200, sharing details on Russian soldiers killed or missing in Ukraine. The TV channel 'Doshd' provided similar details: http://tvrain.ru/soldat/.

89. "Есть информация о 38 российских воинских частях," http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/66773.html, January 12, 2015; Lost Ivan Project, http://lostivan.com/news, accessed February 22, 2015; В Костроме простились с десантником Анатолием Травкиным, который погиб в бою на востоке Украины, http://www.1tv.ru/news/social/266969, September 4, 2014; "Russian and foreign volunteers: We are here to defend the world from fascism," http://russian.rt.com/article/48536, September 4, 2014; "Serving Russian soldiers on leave fighting Ukrainian troops alongside rebels, pro-Russian separatist leader says," The Daily Telegraph, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/angela-merkel/11060559/Serving-Russian-soldiers-on-leave-fighting-Ukrainian-troops-alongside-rebels-pro-Russian-separatist-leader-says.html, August 28, 2014.

90. "Российской армии в Украине нет? А это кто и, главное, зачем?" http://zpolk-org.livejournal.com/, December 5, 2014; Live Journal, http://zpolk-org.livejournal.com/, August 26, 2014.

91. Mikhail Bushuev, "Evidence mounting of Russian troops in Ukraine," Deutsche Welle, http://www.dw.de/evidence-mounting-of-russian-troops-in-ukraine/a-18294255, March 4, 2015.

92. See: http://tvrain.ru/soldat/; "Есть информация о 38 российских воинских частях," http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/66773.html, January 12, 2015; Lost Ivan Project, http://lostivan.com/news, accessed February 22, 2015; Live Journal, http://zpolk-org.livejournal.com/, August 26, 2014.

93. Ibid.

94. Most fatalities listed in Russian social media appear to be service personnel from VDV, the Ground Forces with lesser numbers from GRU Spetsnaz. See: Https://www.facebook.com/groups/gruz200/members, accessed February 22, 2015.

95. Dmitry Trenin, "Ukraine and the New Divide," http://carnegie.ru/2014/07/30/ukraine-and-the-new-divide/hln1, July 30, 2014.

96. As Timothy L. Thomas explains: 'One of the prime goals for a commander in warfare is to interfere with the decision-making process of an enemy commander. This goal is often accomplished by the use of disinformation, camouflage, or some other stratagem. For Russia, one of the primary methods is through the use of the theory of reflexive control (RC). This principle can be used against either human-mental or computer-based decision-making processors. The theory is similar to the idea of perception management, except that it attempts to control more than manage a subject. Reflexive control is defined as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.' Timothy L. Thomas, "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military," Journal of Slavic Military Studies 17: 2004. p. 237.

97. Александр Ермаков, "Путин. Крым на Родину," Fontanka.ru, http://www.fontanka.ru/2015/03/15/104/, March 15, 2015.

98. During Putin's speech to Russian lawmakers on March 18, 2014 he compared Crimea's 'secession' from Ukraine to Kosovo's secession from Serbia. See full speech, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDLwu4E35us, Moscow, March 18, 2014.