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Russo-Ukrainian war

Summer 2018

Eugene Leshan

15 September 2018

For the fourth year the war in the east of Ukraine has a sluggish positional character — as journalists and cheap military experts like to say, it has become a «low-intensity conflict.» We have already written about the essence of the Minsk agreements, which gave the Russian-Ukrainian War this characteristic. Since then, the situation on the front has been stable, the losses are relatively small, and in the near future no radical changes are expected — unless of course Putin suddenly gets an appetite for more.

And yet, in the last few months, something has changed.

In particular, in April 2018 Ukraine rebranded the military operation in the Donbas. It was announced the completion of the Anti-Terrorist Operation — which is quite logical and even very late, since full-scale military operations against Russian troops and pro-Russian armed collaborators with both sides using artillery and armored vehicles (and even combat aviation on Ukraine's side) were taking place in 2014, meaning the conflict already ceased to resemble a counter-terrorism operation. In short, since April 30, it is officially called the «the Joint Forces Operation to Ensure National Security and Defense and

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Deterrence of the Armed Aggression of the Russian Federation in the Territory of the Donetsk and Lugansk Regions,» or, much more briefly, the JFO.

Not only the name has changed. The fight against terrorism was under the jurisdiction of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), therefore it was led by the SBU although, we repeat, the operation itself was of a completely military nature. Now the Joint Staff of the JFO and, in general, all the affairs in the zone of the operation are controlled by the army.

The command of the JFO is headed by the General of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) Sergey Naiev. His staff has authority over almost all military and civilian structures in the area of responsibility, including the Security Service, the Emergency Service and so on, up to the State Fiscal Service.

A serious problem for the Armed Forces of Ukraine was the restriction imposed by the Minsk agreements on opening of fire on the enemy. That is, according to Minsk agreements, you can not shoot at all. But if the enemy shoots, one can either perish under fire, or shoot back. However, this kind of «rebuff» must be coordinated with the higher command, and the command does not always give permission, preferring to leave the decision on the conscience of immediate commanders of battalions, companies and platoons, so that they take on full responsibility. Now the procedure for permitting fire in response is much more simplified, and the enemy receives a response in a timely and effective manner.

The approach to logistics and security in the area of operations has also been changed. Earlier, the roads of Donetsk and Luhansk regions were simply jammed with roadblocks. At each one there were thorough verifications. Now out of 147 roadblocks only 43 remain, and movement through the regions is simplified. However, at the same time, it is now more difficult for journalists and volunteers to get into the JFO zone. They need permits.

also stop Russian vessels under this treaty, but it has absolutely no means of doing so- the Ukrainian coast guard is seriously inferior to the contingent of the Border Service and the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation in the Azov Sea, and the Ukrainian Navy in the Sea of Azov is absent altogether.

Is it worth waiting for the resolution of the Donbas problem in the near future? Probably not. It is more profitable for both parties to stall for time, using the Minsk agreements as an excuse to decide nothing. Both sides are trying to make the war as expensive and unprofitable for the enemy, and with minimal losses for themselves. What is peculiar is that both sides have been somewhat successful in this effort.

Thus, the state takes information and material support for the army and civilians in the JFO zone under its monopoly control. This, on the one hand, is good, as there have been cases when journalists and volunteers behaved destructively, spreading unverified, unreliable information, revealing the positions of the Ukrainian military, and engaged, consciously or stupidly, in other activities unacceptable in war. But now it is more difficult for the faithful volunteers and journalists to help the local population and publicize violations in the army.

The strengthening of state control in the JFO zone has affected not only logistics and security. Back in 2014, the state was concerned about the problem of Ukrainian illegal armed formations, volunteer battalions which were formed at the beginning of the war to organize resistance to Russian aggression. We do not put a negative connotation to the word «illegal,» but merely state the legal fact- these armed formations, known as «dobrobats» did not have a legal status. Subsequently, the absolute majority of the volunteer battalions were either included in the official units of the Armed Forces or the National Guard (e.g. Aidar, Azov), or dissolved- some voluntarily, others forced under the threat of physical liquidation.

Only the largest and most organized group with an official «roof» (patronage) from state security organs remains. These are the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps «Right Sector» (DUK PS), the paramilitary wing of the far-right party of the same name, and the Ukrainian Volunteer Army (UDA), which broke away from the DUK PS and is the military wing of the State Movement of Dmytro Yarosh, who was the former leader of «Right Sector.» These volunteer formations carried out various combat missions on the front line with the unofficial agreement from the commanders of the combat units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

After assuming the post, the commander of the area of operations, General Naiev, said that it is unacceptable to find armed formations outside the control of the command. After

that, he held meetings with the commanders of the DUK PS and UDA, during which he proposed to these formations various options for legalization within the framework of special operations forces, reserve service, territorial defense and intelligence. Also, volunteers were invited to participate in the training of border guards and territorial defense. They have experience, since both UDA and DUK PS have good facilities for training their own volunteers.

As to the future fate of these far-right volunteer formations, it is too early to judge, but the state clearly outlined the prospect for them: either accept integration into the legal framework and become independent combat units in the armed forces while maintaining political structures, or be squeezed out of the war zone with subsequent criminalization, prosecution and liquidation.

Now about the actual hostilities. The Minsk agreements do not leave room for military genius – the front line is well-defined; the war can only be positional. What remains for the opposing sides? Fire from small arms where the positions are sufficiently close, and artillery shelling, which is formally banned, solely in order to break this prohibition.

However, the Minsk Agreements also stipulate a «gray zone» – the territory between the positions of Ukrainian and (pro)Russian troops recorded in the documents. It sometimes reaches several kilometers in width, large enough to encompass populated settlements. In fact, a significant part of the «gray zone» is controlled either by the Armed Forces of Ukraine or by the invaders. From time to time, Ukrainian troops conduct operations to force the enemy out of some part of the «gray zone.»

In particular, via this method the Ukrainian forces took control of several villages in the immediate vicinity of the occupied city of Horlivka, around which Ukrainian troops are holding in a semi-ring. The AFU takes similar actions from time to time to the west of the Lugansk region. The commander of the op-

eration, General Naiev, claims that about 15 km² of Ukrainian territory was liberated in this way. True, after this statement, reports of liberating 10 km² near Horlivka were received, but this information needs to be checked- it is not uncommon for the AFU's achievements to be seriously exaggerated by propagandists.

It should be admitted, however, that all these actions haven't undertaken exclusively within the framework of the “gray zone,” beyond which the AFU does not try to move. This would be a blatant violation of the Minsk agreements, and Russia could use it as an excuse to unleash a full-scale invasion.

Russia continues to supply weapons and armored vehicles in the occupied areas of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions. True, exact figures in Ukraine are difficult to cite. For example, according to the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, 35 500 people are fighting against Ukraine in the Donbas, including Russians, with 475 tanks, 948 armored combat vehicles, 762 artillery pieces and 208 rocket launcher systems. At the same time, the head of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Muzhenko cites other data– 32,000 people and 700 tanks. This diversity is clear: no one will let Ukrainian observers into the occupied territories, so that they can count the number of troops and armored vehicles there. Therefore, the data are most often estimated, taking into account sketchy information about the observed echelons with equipment, about storage sites discovered by the OSCE monitoring mission, and so on.

The only area where confrontation with Russia has seriously increased is the Sea of Azov. Russian border guards stop and delay ships going to or from Ukrainian ports. And often the Russians act in close proximity to the ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk. Ukraine has concentrated on the coast some forces to repel a possible attack from the sea, but it can not protect its vessels, especially since Russia operates within the framework of a bilateral treaty on the status of the Azov Sea. Ukraine could