

Ukraine's Donetsk Has Turned Into 'European Kashmir,' Expert Says

October 24, 2014

The  Moscow Times

LONDON — The tug-of-war between Russia and Ukraine over the separatist stronghold city of Donetsk has created a European Kashmir and will lead to several years of conflict, an expert on Russia has said.

Militarization by both sides along the border has risen and public animosity between the two countries is growing, said Igor Sutyagin, senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies and a former political prisoner in Russia.

"We have another Kashmir in the middle of Europe ... There will be clashes from time to time because neither side will be able to pull back," he told delegates on Wednesday at a Global Security Seminar organized by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, referring to the disputed territory on the border between India and Pakistan.

According to the United Nations, more than 3,500 people have died in the conflict, which erupted after pro-Western leaders took power in Kiev following street protests that chased Moscow-backed president Viktor Yanukovich from power.

Kiev and the West accuse Russia of fanning the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. They have imposed sanctions on Moscow, whom they see as providing support, including arms and troop reinforcements, to the rebellion. Moscow denies this.

World leaders including Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko discussed the crisis last week but there was little progress on how to end the violence. Growing Militarization

Ukraine has relocated nearly all of its armed forces, which used to be deployed in the western part of the country, closer to the border with Russia in the east, said Sutyagin.

"They never considered Russia as the threat. Now they completely changed their defense plans," he said in an interview.

Russia has already launched the process of building another air assault brigade near Ukraine and establishing more units in areas just into the Ukrainian border, he said.

The public mood has also changed, said the researcher, who was imprisoned for 11 years in Russia on espionage charges, which he has consistently denied.

Sutyagin was freed in 2010 in a dramatic spy swap arranged by the U.S. He and three others were traded for 10 Russian sleeper agents in Vienna.

"In Russia, no one thought Ukraine as the enemy just a year ago. Now I think approximately three-fourths of the Russian population believe that Ukrainians are very, very dangerous," he said.

"In Ukraine the situation is slightly better because the Ukrainians do not suffer similar press propaganda but it's also worsening. And you cannot change public mood overnight. It will take a long time," he added.

Sutyagin warned that this could lead to growing hatred among people living in Donetsk.

"Three million people accumulating hatred is very dangerous. After all they're both Russians and Ukrainians. This hatred will inevitably spill over to both sides," he said.

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