

Ukraine and Russia Trade Barbs as Rebels Renew Donetsk Airport Assault

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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An aerial footage shot by a drone shows the shell craters at the Sergey Prokofiev International Airport damaged by shelling during fighting between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian government forces, in Donetsk, eastern Ukraine, seen in this still image taken from a Jan. 15, 2015

KIEV — Pro-Russian separatists renewed attacks on Ukrainian forces at an airport complex in the east on Monday after Kiev launched a mass operation to reclaim lost ground there that Russia called a "strategic mistake."

Ukrainian officials said three soldiers had been killed and 66 wounded over the past 24 hours, during which they said they had returned battle lines at the airport outside Donetsk to the status quo under a much violated international peace plan.

Russia expressed concern at what it called escalation by Kiev and published its own peace plan on Monday in the form of a letter from President Vladimir Putin to Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko, which it said Poroshenko had rejected.

"It's the biggest, even strategic mistake of the Ukrainian authorities to bank on a military solution to the crisis," the Interfax news agency quoted Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin as saying. "This may lead to irreversible consequences for Ukrainian statehood."

In Kiev, Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk said Ukrainian intelligence had confirmed Russian cross-border arms deliveries to the separatists were continuing.

"Tanks, howitzers, Grad systems, Smerch, Buk," Yatsenyuk told a joint news conference with Polish Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz, listing Russian-made missile systems that he said were being channelled to the separatists.

"Radio-electronic surveillance stations are not on sale in the Donetsk market — they are only to be had from the Russian Defense Ministry and Russian military intelligence," he said.

In Kharkiv, a big eastern city well away from the conflict zone, an explosive device went off near a court house, injuring at least 14 people in the latest of a series of mysterious explosions in the city, police said.

Markiyan Lubkivsky, an adviser for the state security service SBU, said on his Facebook page the incident was being treated as a "terrorist act."

Ukrainian officials have insisted Moscow sticks to the 12-point peace plan agreed in Minsk in September, which they say was not violated by its airport counter-offensive, launched after troops had appeared to be pinned down inside the complex.

Ukrainian military spokesman Andriy Lysenko said the situation was still very tense around the airport, which has symbolic value for both sides, and separatists continued attacks on government forces there and elsewhere in the east.

Since plans for another round of peace talks last week were abandoned, fighting has flared up again in Ukraine, whose Crimean peninsula was annexed by Russia in March last year, prompting a crisis with the West, which has imposed sanctions.

The World Health Organisation says more than 4,800 people have been killed in the conflict.

Sanctions to Stay

In Brussels, European Union foreign ministers said now was not the time to ease the economic sanctions against Russia despite conciliatory proposals from the EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini.

"In light of the current events in eastern Ukraine, no one had the idea of loosening the sanctions," German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier told reporters after talks among EU ministers.

Apart from calling for a cease-fire, the Minsk agreement called for the withdrawal of armed groups and foreign fighters as well as military equipment — meaning, for Kiev, weapons and rocket systems which it says Moscow is supplying to the rebels.

Despite what Kiev and the West says is incontrovertible proof, Russia denies its troops are

involved or that it is funneling military equipment to the separatists.

Putin's letter called for urgent moves to withdraw large-calibre weapons from the conflict zone. "This is now an absolute priority," said a Russian Foreign Ministry statement.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry hit back, calling for Moscow to show its readiness to comply with the Minsk agreement by signing a timetable for implementing its main points.

"It is very important that a concrete plan is signed for fulfilling all, without exception, the points of the Minsk agreements, and not just those that Russia or the terrorists like," Foreign Ministry spokesman Evhen Perebynis said on TV channel 112.

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