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Debaltseve Was Fatal Flaw in Minsk Agreement on Ukraine

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Hundreds of soldiers were reportedly killed attempting to leave the area, raising the question of why Debaltseve wasn't addressed in Minsk last week.

When the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France spent 17 hours last week negotiating an agreement aimed at stopping the fighting in eastern Ukraine and paving the way for a future fundamental settlement of the crisis, there was one key issue they failed to agree on.

This was the question of the ongoing fighting around Debaltseve, a key railway junction where thousands of Ukrainian troops appeared last week to be encircled by pro-Russian insurgents.

After numerous skirmishes in the past few days that have led to hundreds of lives being lost, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko announced Wednesday that the Ukrainian army was retreating from the area, while continuing to insist that the army had never been encircled

and that the area had been under its control. (See Story, Page 2.)

His statements were undermined by photographs and reports flooding out of the area of Ukrainian soldiers being attacked even as they were attempting to leave.

Journalists and military advisers in the area reported that the entire Debaltseve area was burning, prompting comparisons to the desperate battle for the city of Stalingrad during World War II.

Poroshenko said that 80 percent of forces had already withdrawn with their weapons and another two columns were expected to leave, according to a statement published on the presidential website.

In a conversation with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Tuesday, Poroshenko said the failure to observe the cease-fire around Debaltseve was a "cynical attack on the Minsk agreements."

Alexander Zakharchenko, leader of the self-proclaimed separatist Donetsk People's Republic, told BBC News over the weekend that "there isn't a word about Debaltseve in the Minsk agreements.

"This means that Ukraine simply betrayed the 5,000 people encircled there," he said.

It is not yet clear how many soldiers have perished in the bitter fight for Debaltseve, but the number is in the hundreds, if not thousands, raising the question of why the issue could not have been settled in the Minsk agreement.

Impasse in Minsk

According to President Vladimir Putin, Ukrainian troops were already surrounded in the Debaltseve area before the Minsk talks last week.

"I spoke about this at the meeting in Minsk," Putin told journalists during a Tuesday visit to Hungary.

"I said that the surrounded troops would try to break through and that the militia, who had got the Ukrainian troops surrounded, would resist these attempts and try to keep the encirclement in place, and this would inevitably lead to further clashes," he said.

Putin said that the Minsk agreement "offers an opportunity" for the peaceful resolution of the conflict and that it "could be cemented by a resolution by the UN Security Council."

Andrei Kolesnikov, a long-time Kremlin pool journalist who has followed Putin closely, wrote in the Kommersant business daily on Friday that the Debaltseve issue was the main point of contention during the Minsk talks and was discussed for as long as eight hours.

According to Kolesnikov, Putin said that Ukrainian army soldiers were encircled in Debaltseve and that this could threaten the cease-fire agreement, while Poroshenko denied that they were encircled.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Wednesday that the demarcation line from which Ukrainian forces were due to withdraw under the Minsk agreement was set at the front line of fighting, outside of Debaltseve, meaning Ukrainian troops in Debaltseve were effectively left inside rebel territory. He echoed Putin's words that concerns had been raised over this during the Minsk negotiations.

"Poroshenko said [in Minsk] that there was no problem with Debaltseve, that there was no encirclement," Lavrov told journalists in Moscow, Interfax reported.

A Waste of Time?

Alexander Khramchikhin, a military expert from the Institute for Political and Military Analysis, said that the Minsk agreement was "meaningless" because it did did not settle the Debaltseve situation.

"Poroshenko could not give it up because he would have been torn apart in Kiev," he said in a phone interview.

Khramchikhin said that the fact that Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande had not signed anything will allow them to relinquish responsibility for the breakdown of the agreement.

Vladimir Yevseyev, director of the Center of Social and Political Sciences in Moscow, said that with or without the Minsk agreements, after the Ukrainian army withdraws from Debaltseve, there will be several months of relative calm.

"Both sides need a break, the Ukrainian army needs to restore its ability to fight, which will take two to three months," Yevseyev said in a phone interview.

Yevseyev compared the Debaltseve situation with the August battle for the city of Ilovaisk, when the Ukrainian army was encircled and hundreds of its troops killed.

"The new cease-fire will be similar to the one we observed after the first Minsk talks [in September], it will last until the Ukrainian army regains strength," he said.

"In order for a proper truce to be achieved there, a fully demilitarized zone has to be created with at least 20,000 UN peacemakers deployed, who will control how it is observed," he said.

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