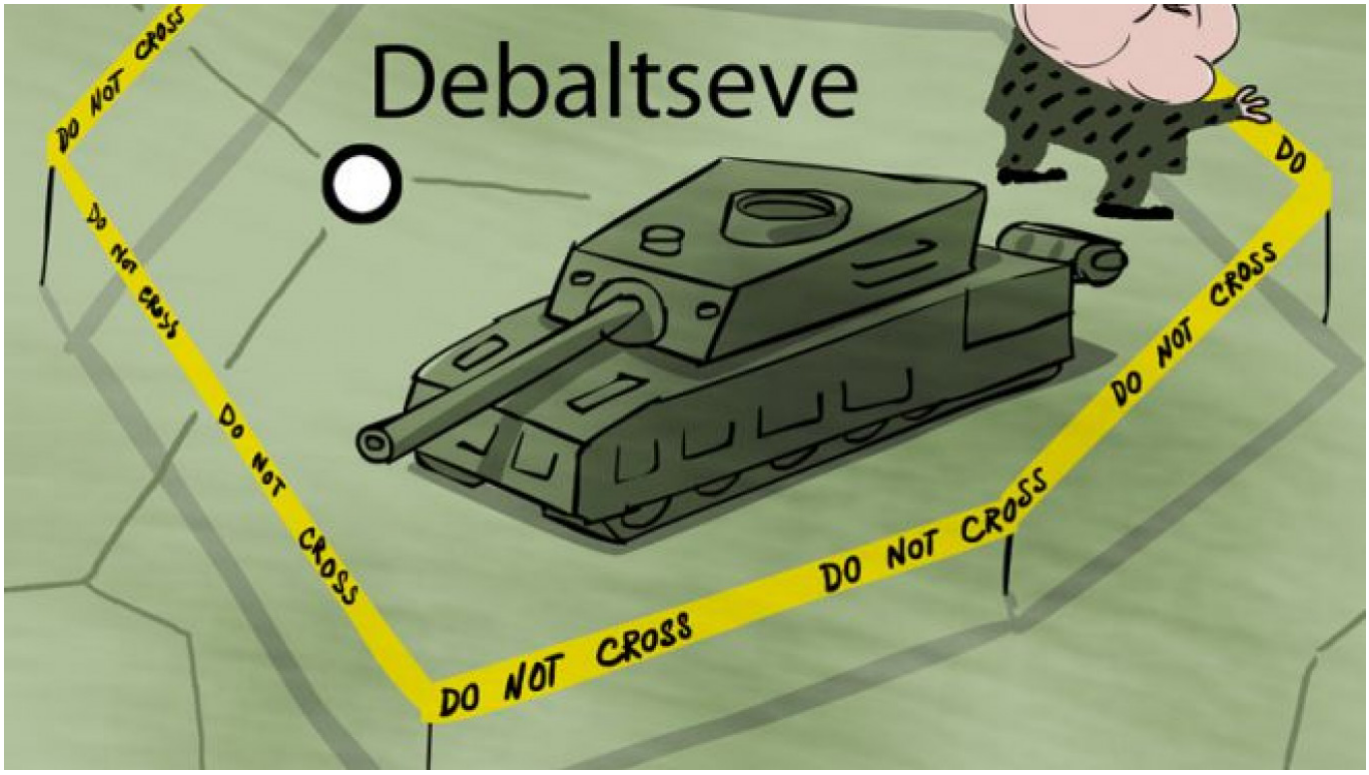
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Poroshenko's Incompetence Lost Debaltseve

By Josh Cohen

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As long lines of shell-shocked Ukrainian troops straggled out of Debaltseve last month after a stinging defeat to the Russian-backed separatists there, the focus was on how the separatists had used the support of Russian-supplied weaponry and support troops to inflict a stinging defeat on Kiev's forces in the key railroad junction town.

However by focusing on the role played by Russia in eastern Ukraine, many analysts have overlooked the extent to which the incompetence of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and the Ukrainian military high command caused Kiev's Debaltseve debacle. Both before the battle and subsequently, Kiev's political and military leadership seemed completely out touch with the reality of events on the battlefield.

The shape of the front lines after the first Minsk agreement left the Ukrainian military holding a little sliver of land stretching into rebel territory that was surrounded by separatists forces on three sides. Toward the bottom of this sliver of land lay Debaltseve.

Once the separatist forces regained full control of Donetsk airport, they immediately began placing troops and equipment into positions surrounding the several thousand Ukrainian forces at the bottom of the Debaltseve salient.

At this point, the rebels very publicly proclaimed their intention to cut the supply lines into Debaltseve, with the objective of completely surrounding the thousands of Ukrainian troops in the town. It was clear then to even casual observers that Kiev's forces were in a very precarious position.

At this point, Ukraine's high command should have withdrawn its thousands of troops from the Debaltseve salient to Artemivsk and other towns at the top of the salient. This would have created a straight line across the front that would no longer have been surrounded on three sides by separatist troops.

Why Ukraine's leadership did not take this step in late January to pre-empt the separatist encirclement strategy is a mystery. While Kiev would have conceded Debaltseve to the separatist troops, Ukraine's military would have created a new line of demarcation with a straight front that was at no risk of immediate encirclement.

"To keep the bulge in Debaltseve was from a military perspective utterly useless," said Gustav Gressel, an expert on military affairs in Eastern Europe at the European Council on Foreign Relations. "If you have no chance for further offense and having the much less experienced and sophisticated troops, retreating to a line that is much easier to defend should have been the priority," added Gressel.

As the battle for Debaltseve heated up in February, the Ukrainian forces in the city began to come under increasingly sharp attack from separatist forces. Rebel troops were clearly determined to cut the main highway into Debaltseve that was used to resupply Ukrainian troops with ammunition and military hardware.

However, rather than order a controlled withdrawal while the road out of Debaltseve still remained open, the Ukrainian high command ignored reality and ordered its troops to dig in and fight. On about Feb. 10, the rebels managed to capture the tiny town of Logvinovo, a strategic point hugging the highway into Debaltseve, and it was clear that thousands of Ukrainian troops were now surrounded.

While the situation in Debaltseve for Ukrainian troops was becoming untenable, there remained one more chance for Kiev to affect a controlled withdrawal from Debaltseve. During the Minsk II negotiations, Poroshenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly spent many hours arguing whether Debaltseve was actually "encircled."

Refusing to bow to reality, Poroshenko declined the opportunity to accept Putin's offer to withdraw Ukrainian forces from Debaltseve under the truce agreement. Poroshenko then compounded this mistake by agreeing to push out the official start of the cease-fire by 48 hours.

Not surprisingly, the separatist forces used this time to tighten the noose on Kiev's forces, and shortly thereafter Ukrainian troops began streaming out of Debaltseve in small disorganized groups across fields and side roads, leaving behind much equipment as well as

dead and wounded Ukrainian troops behind.

Sadly, this was not the first time that the Ukrainian high command allowed its troops to be surrounded rather than withdrawing to more defensible lines.

In July, rebel troops surrounded Ukrainian forces in a southern "cauldron" of a narrow sliver of land between Donetsk and Luhansk. The disaster at Ilovaisk was another example of the Ukrainian high command sacrificing its troops by not recognizing in time that they would be surrounded.

Why do Ukrainian troops keep becoming entrapped in these "cauldrons" and what reforms should the Ukrainian military undertake to prevent future "Debaltseve-style" disasters? Gressel believes that Poroshenko should start by firing the current Ukrainian general staff. "I know that the figures at the top posts of the army are pure political appointees who owe their posts to party-affiliation, private ties to the minister, family ties, etc., Their competences played a minor — if any — role," Gressel said.

From there, Gressel told me, the military's command and control and logistics chains need to function properly so that troops in the field can count on being resupplied — something that did not occur in Debaltseve. Western initiatives to send advisers and trainers can also play a critical role in assisting Ukraine's military reforms, and such assistance may be as important, if not more so, than lethal aid.

Military reforms, however, are not alone sufficient. Poroshenko also needs to do a much better job speaking openly to Ukraine's citizens about the conflict. While the Debaltseve debacle was a military setback for Kiev, the defeat was exacerbated by Poroshenko's comical attempt to spin the Debaltseve defeat into a victory.

Asserting that it was he who had ordered his forces to retreat from Debaltseve, Poroshenko claimed that "there was no encirclement, and our troops left the area in a planned and organized manner with all the heavy weaponry."

By all accounts, Poroshenko's statement was patently false. Numerous Western journalists on the scene interviewed fleeing Ukrainian troops who described the withdrawal as anything but planned and organized. Troops spoke of breaking up into small, unorganized groups, many on foot, streaming across fields and forests to escape the separatist encirclement in any way possible.

Not surprisingly, reports of front-line Ukrainian soldiers mocking Poroshenko's claim that there was no "encirclement" were widespread.

Poroshenko's statement indicates a leader either completely removed from the military reality his troops faced or else was simply an attempt to mislead the Ukrainian people. Neither of these possibilities depict the Ukrainian President as a competent and inspiring leader capable of rallying his country and making the reforms needed to turn Ukraine's military into an effective fighting force.

While Ukraine's leadership has the tendency to blame Russia for all its problems, until Kiev sorts out its own house it will continue to suffer further Debaltseve-style setbacks.

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