The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Largely Unnoticed, Full-Scale War May Be Returning to Ukraine

July was the deadliest month in the Donbass for over a year.

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August 04, 2016



A woman inspects debris while standing outside her damaged house, which according to locals was caused by recent shelling, in the village of Staromikhailovka, outside the separatist-held city of Donetsk, Ukraine. **Alexander Ermochenko / Reuters**

Whilst the world's attention is focused on Syria, the U.S. election and the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War, eastern Ukraine once again teeters on the unthinkable. Last month was the deadliest the region has seen in over a year, sparking growing fears of the conflict re-escalating to its previous intensity.

The conflict has killed 10,000 people since it began in April 2014. While casualties have continued at a much reduced level since spring 2015, in recent months both sides have returned to using heavy artillery, including howitzers and 'grad' multiple rocket launchers.

In July, the United Nations reported that eight died and 65 were injured.

With escalating violence, it is getting much harder for international organizations to monitor the situation. Humanitarian assistance missions have also been hindered by the military up-tick and political problems with de facto authorities in the separatist statelets of Luhansk and Donetsk.

Just last week, monitors from the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were held at gunpoint by separatist forces. "The escalation of hostilities and the accompanying civilian casualties in eastern Ukraine over the last two months are very worrying," said the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein in a recent report.

Separatist forces in eastern Ukraine have heightened their rhetoric. This week, Denis Pushilin, the self-declared chairman of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), told pro-Kremlin newspaper Izvestia that there was a risk of full-scale military operations returning to the conflict. The DPR stood ready to retaliate, he said.

Tensions are rising in Kiev, too.

Ukraine's head of National Security and Defence Oleksandr Turchynov spoke of re-introducing martial law in frontline regions, something has not happened since 2014. When Nadiya Savchenko, a famous Ukrainian pilot recently released from a Russian prison, spoke of the need for reconciliation with the east, she immediately provoked a backlash from Kiev politicians. And Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman has said elections could not be held in Donbas until the Russian army withdraws from Ukraine.

Such elections are a central part of the peace settlement signed by leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France in Minsk in February 2015. Few now believe they will ever happen.

In Moscow, the conflict has largely vanished from Russian television screens. State propaganda streams have mostly switched attention to Russian forces fighting in Syria, and the escalating political crises in the West. At the same time, there are still 40,000 Russian troops on standby on Ukraine's border (and nobody knows how many more inside Ukraine).

The West, distracted by its own crises, is tired of the conflict and Kiev's often disappointing efforts to reform a system its people fought to overthrow in February 2014. The rise of American and European populism has worked in Moscow's favor, undermining the hitherto united front on sanctions against Russia. U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump's recent comments on Crimea, that he as president would "look at" recognizing the peninsula as Russian territory, has raised alarm bells in Kiev while being welcomed in Moscow.

When the war began, many thought it will turn into another frozen conflict on Russia's borders. With no end in sight, the conflict in eastern Ukraine is showing few signs of frigidity.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/08/04/donbass-a54871