

Russia and Ukraine: a new stage in the military conflict?

In recent weeks and months there was an increase in official statements by Russian political leaders regarding the situation in Ukraine, following by renewed Russian media campaigns alleging that the Ukrainian government is threatening the already unstable peace in the occupied areas of Luhansk and Donetsk. The SCEEUS team breaks down what this can mean for the security situation in Ukraine.

Fredrik Löjdquist, director of SCEEUS

The aggressive Russian escalation in relationship to Ukraine, both rhetorically and in concrete action over the last seven-eight months is of great concern for European security. The military build-up earlier this year and now again, recent articles on Ukraine by Putin and Medvedev, and the escalatory tonality in Russian state media must be taken very seriously.

To quote Chekhov: "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise, don't put it there." All OSCE states have undertaken to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, and the gun needs to be taken down from the wall.

While it is safe to assume that Kremlin keeps several options open, the gun is put on the table as it were, Moscow now tests the reactions from Ukraine and Western capitals. This is strategic communication, security policy signaling in the classical sense, and the signal from Kremlin is clear: to Kyiv to become more acquiescent and to Washington and EU-capitals not to act against Russia's interests in perceived sphere of influence in its neighbourhood.

The timing with a new administration in Washington, which seeks a "stable and predictable" relationship to Russia, a new government to be formed in Berlin and a tougher Zelensky is no coincidence. The reactions from Washington, Brussel and key EU-capitals as Berlin, Paris and London are now carefully monitored in Moscow as the next steps are planned.

It is a good sign that William Burns visited Moscow last week to discuss this issue, while the signals coming from Europe are either mixed or non-existent, although this is a real threat to European security. Moscow needs to be held accountable for its aggressive and threatening behaviour. Not reacting to Russia's actions undermines the security of Ukraine and the rules-based European security order.

John Zachau, SCEEUS analyst

The reported Russian military buildup near the border with Ukraine and foreign minister Lavrov's recent allegation that Ukraine is trying to drag Russia into the Donbas conflict – a conflict that Moscow is the initiator of and driving force behind – must be seen as part of the longer trend of Russian antagonism towards Ukraine. The Russian military aggression that started in 2014 is still ongoing and there was a similar Russian military buildup near the border and in illegally annexed Crimea also in the spring. The official Russian rhetoric, as evidenced also by the largely fictitious articles on Ukraine by Putin and Medvedev, indicates that the Russian goals regarding Ukraine have not yet been reached.

The buildup raises questions of how a potential Russian escalation of hostilities in Ukraine could be prevented or responded to. Ukraine's right to self-defense in line with international law must not be forgotten. The international community should acknowledge this right and signal to Moscow that further violations of the European security order will be responded to with toughened sanctions. Practical cooperation to strengthen Ukraine's resilience and the common situational awareness should also increase. Here, the EU and the US must stay united and work together – needless to say with Kyiv and each other, but also with other key allies and partners.

Andreas Umland, SCEEUS analyst

One of several worrisome aspects of the recent rise in confrontational rhetoric and behavior of Moscow vis-a-vis Ukraine is the renewed emphasis, within Russia's bellicose propaganda, on an alleged rise of Ukrainian fascism. A prominent topic is, for instance, the recent appointment of a Ukrainian nationalist activist, former irregular fighter in the Donbas and member of parliament, as well as initial leader of the so-called Right Sector Dmytro Yarosh as an advisor to Ukraine's General Staff. During the first half of 2014, the Right Sector and Yarosh were major themes in Russian state-directed mass media. The allegedly high influence of ultra-nationalists in Ukraine was purposefully asserted for the justification of Moscow's military actions on Crimea and in the Donbas as presumably necessary humanitarian interventions. Yarosh's small party had then just emerged and had only limited relevance for Ukrainian political processes, however. Today, Yarosh leads an even more marginal grouping called "The Statist Initiative", unknown to many Ukrainians. Yet he is again being elevated by the Kremlin to the role of a major player in Ukrainian politics. The Kremlin's rediscovery of Yarosh is a disturbing sign and could preview again a major escalation in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, as had been the case before the intensification of Moscow's attack on Ukraine in 2014.