



The Arrest of Alleged Ukrainian Saboteurs in Crimea

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Russia has announced that it has intercepted a group of Ukrainian saboteurs in Crimea. The FSB has accused them of planning terrorist attacks on the peninsula during Russian parliamentary elections in September 2016. The event may serve as a pretext for Russia to increase pressure on Ukraine in order to make it unilaterally implement the provisions of the Minsk Agreement. Vladimir Putin's declaration that he will not attend a planned Normandy Four meeting may also be interpreted to mean that Russia's aim is to test a new variant of political communication with the West.

The Crimean Incident. The Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia has announced that a group of saboteurs planning terrorist attacks in Crimea were arrested near Armyansk, in the north of the peninsula, during the night of 6 to 7 August 2016. The detainees allegedly possessed a significant number of explosives, as well as weapons belonging to the Ukrainian armed forces. According to the FSB, the group was acting under orders from Ukrainian military intelligence and intended to destabilise the situation in Crimea during and ahead of Russian parliamentary elections scheduled for 18 September 2016 (a bomb attack on the Yalta-Simferopol highway was allegedly one of their goals). The FSB has also claimed that other groups of terrorists, supported by the special forces of the Ukrainian Defence Ministry, attempted to get onto the peninsula during the night of 7 to 8 August, but were effectively stopped.

To date, the FSB has revealed the identities of three of the detainees (Russian media say seven were arrested in total). One is Yevheniy Panov, who allegedly works for Ukrainian military intelligence, although Ukraine says he served in the Ukrainian army for two years but then he refused to sign a contract and was demobilised at the beginning of August. In an interview for Ukrainian media, his brother said that Yevheniy was abducted from the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, where he was a member of local self-defence forces in Enerhodar, and was awaiting medical rehabilitation as a former participant of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in Donbas. However, Ukrainian intelligence later admitted that he had got onto the peninsula on his own.

It is difficult to verify the information given by the FSB. The news about incidents on the administrative border between the Kherson Oblast and occupied Crimea on 7 August was mentioned only by a few Russian media outlets. Besides, on the day of the incident significant Russian forces and military equipment were nearby, which was noted by Ukraine. Therefore, it seems unlikely that groups of Ukrainian saboteurs were attempting to gain access to the peninsula during the night of 7 to 8 August. Although some witnesses reported gunfire, they claimed it came from occupied Crimea.

Pressure for Implementation of the Minsk Agreement. Regardless of the factual course of events, the alleged Crimean incident may serve as a pretext for Russia to increase pressure on Ukraine. The Ukrainian government's position has been that unilateral implementation of the Minsk Agreement is impossible, and as a result the process of settling the conflict stalled. It is in Russia's interests that Ukraine carries out constitutional reform that will provide for the special status of Donbas, and organises local elections on the territories currently outside the de facto jurisdiction of the Ukrainian government. However, such a solution would legitimise Russian-supported separatist control of Donbas, allowing Moscow to influence a dimension of Ukraine's external policy.

This hypothesis has been strengthened by Putin's declaration that he will not attend the planned Normandy Four meeting during the G20 Summit in China on 4-5 September, a position underlined by a Russian MFA statement of August 11. In this way Russia is trying to put pressure on Germany and France (and indirectly on the United States), so that they force Ukraine to make additional concessions. Putin articulated this demand during a press conference given

on August 10, during which he accused Kyiv of organising provocations and urged countries that support Ukraine to use their influence on the government in order to reach a “peaceful solution” to the situation in Donbas.

Recent moves of Russian troops along Ukraine’s border and in Crimea, although related to Kavkaz-2016 military manoeuvres starting in September 2016, should be interpreted as an element of Russian pressure. Although Ukraine claims they may constitute the first phase of the military intervention on its territory, such a scenario is rather unlikely. However, territorially limited local escalation of the war in Donbas cannot be excluded. For example, at the beginning of August 2016, Denis Pushilin, the self-proclaimed leader of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic, announced that full-scale war may return if Ukraine failed to proceed with the Minsk Agreement implementation.

The Political Context. Russia will falsely accuse Ukraine of planning terrorist acts so as to compromise and undermine the credibility of the government in Kyiv on the international arena, depicting it as a country that blocks political dialogue and resorts to military means of settling the conflict, in opposition to the position of EU countries. In this respect, Russia has already cited the recent attempt to assassinate Igor Plotnitsky, self-proclaimed leader of the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic, although it appears that this was part of an internal power struggle. Nonetheless, it allows Russia to present a negative rhetoric about Ukraine, especially in connection with the 25th anniversary of Ukrainian independence.

Alleged terrorist threats in Crimea distract the inhabitants of the peninsula from internal problems (such as water and energy shortages, delays in the construction of the bridge over the Kerch Strait, and a greatly reduced number of tourists), and provides Russia with an excuse to increase its control there, ostensibly for security reasons. The FSB has announced, among other things, the introduction of additional security measures on the Russian-Ukrainian border and in public places on the peninsula. Undoubtedly, this is an element of preparations for the parliamentary elections in September. Hence, it should be expected that issues related to the alleged threat from Ukraine will serve as a platform for consolidating social support for pro-government forces in the ruling United Russia party’s election campaign.

Conclusions. Escalation of the tensions around Ukraine allows Russia to push for a settlement of the Donbas situation in its own interests. If Ukraine is to be blamed for blocking implementation of the Minsk Agreement, Russia will use international pressure to achieve its desired scenario. Hence, the situation on the Russian-Ukrainian border may further deteriorate in the near future. At the same time, it gives Russia a pretext for testing a new variant of political communication with the West, apart from the Normandy format and Minsk Agreement. The gradual deterioration of Ukraine’s diplomatic position, which has received low international support as a result of Russia’s accusations, works in Moscow’s favour.

In order to support Ukraine, NATO should build on the experience of its own members and join ranks with the European Union, which would mark a step towards implementing the joint NATO-EU declaration from the Warsaw Summit.¹ Support for the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine is of particular importance, to allow it to effectively monitor the border with Russia, the contact line in Donbas, and the administrative line with Crimea. Escalation of the conflict shows that Russia is not interested in implementing the Minsk Agreement, therefore sanctions against this country should be maintained.

¹ For more on possible NATO-Ukraine cooperation, see: D. Szeligowski, “NATO-Ukraine Cooperation after the Warsaw Summit,” *PISM Bulletin no 49 (899)*, 4 August 2016.