Diplomacy Fails to Stop a Massacre in Debaltseve

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EuroPoint: The diplomatic efforts of Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Francois Hollande were unable to stop Putin’s troops from committing a massacre in Debaltseve. Neither did a United Nations bill. This is yet another powerful proof of Russia being incapable of keeping its agreements.

A cynical Putin mocked Ukraine’s defeat in Debaltseve saying, “of course it’s always a hardship when you lose to yesterday’s miners or yesterday’s tractor drivers. But life is life. It’ll surely go on.”

The Ukrainian government claims that 179 soldiers died during the retreat from Debaltseve on February 18; 81 soldiers went missing, and 110 were taken prisoners by the pro-Russian rebels. In stark contrast, pro-Russian separatists claim that 3,084 Ukrainian troops were killed and 50 wounded. It is hard to estimate the real number in the absence of independent observers.

It was news of the Russian encirclement of 8,000 Ukrainian soldiers in Debaltseve in the first place that prompted German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande to “jump on a plane to Moscow” in an attempt to broker a ceasefire. They faced Putin’s stubbornness and determination to take the strategic town.

Debaltseve is a railway hub connecting Donetsk People’s Republic and Lugansk People’s Republic. Ukrainian forces were in controlled of the city since July 2014, and disrupted the flow of supplies between the two breakaway provinces.

A few days later Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko met with Putin, Merkel, and Hollande in Minsk in an attempt to negotiate a new ceasefire. Out of the sixteen hours of talks, eight were spent negotiating the situation in Debaltseve. They agreed to start a ceasefire on February 15, despite Putin’s efforts to delay such an agreement for ten days in order to give his troops enough time to conquer the town.

Putin did not sign the Minsk agreement since, he insists, Russia is not part of the conflict. Yet even as the talks were ongoing, 50 Russian tanks, 40 missile systems, and 40 armored vehicles crossed into Ukraine through the Izvaryne border crossing.

Russian “Tractors” Plowing Debaltseve © imgur

Russian soldiers make up 90% of the “rebel” army. According to the Associated Press, Russian conscripts are given the choice between a well paying three-year contract involving military drills around Rostov-on-Don, or jail time for...
treason against the homeland. In fact Rostov, located 50 miles away from Ukraine, means going to war in Donbass. Dozens of such soldiers were returned to their families in coffins, with the explanation “killed by explosions during drills in the Rostov region.” Military service is mandatory in Russia.

Putin has also been moving troops from Central Asia to the Ukrainian conflict. Several Russian media outlets reported at the beginning of February that 3,000 Russian soldiers from the 201st Russian base in Tajikistan were being deployed to the Ukrainian border.

**Fall of Debaltseve**

While Poroshenko was trumpeting to the media that there was no encirclement at Debaltseve and that Ukrainian troops were in control, the Ukrainian army was making secret preparations for a plan to evacuate its soldiers. The situation was dire, as the rebels had gained control of the road linking Debaltseve and Artemivsk on the Ukrainian side, and installed mines and artillery along it, making it impassible: “we have closed the kettle, anybody who leaves this kettle will be in the interlocking field of fire from our artillery. From today, the road is under fire” rebel leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko told Russian television on January 30.

Putin advised on two occasions the Ukrainian soldiers in Debaltseve to lay down their arms and promised the rebels would guarantee them a “safe return to their families:” first time he did so while leaving Minsk on February 12, and the second time in Budapest, on February 17. In a bizarre move, Russia sponsored a bill in the United Nations Security Council calling for an immediate cease-fire in the embattled town. The bill passed unanimously.

**To Arm or Not to Arm Ukraine?**

In the meanwhile, Merkel, Hollande, Poroshenko, and Putin still insist that the cease-fire has a chance of succeeding. “We want to shape this European peace order together with Russia, not against Russia,” said Merkel in Demmin, a few hours after the fall of Debaltseve, “but we cannot waive our principles – and the annexation of Crimea for example is a violation of international law.”

At stake is a decision on arming Ukraine. Poroshenko had asked for arms from the West, telling the US Congress about the non-lethal aid Ukraine had received so far: “blankets are important, but one cannot win a war with blankets.” Ukraine’s army is poorly armed, with some equipment dating from the ’40s. One unit near Debaltseve had to share a single pair of night vision goggles. Merkel convinced President Obama not to arm Ukraine, and give diplomacy one more chance. A few days later, she signed the Minsk II agreement.
Admitting the Debaltseve massacre and the failure to deter Putin through diplomacy, would mean a possible escalation of the conflict.

Ukrainian soldier in Artemivsk: "Why should we fight? We have no chance against Russia. And the West won't help us."