

Russia's Actions against Ukraine

10 June 2014

1. What has been happening in Ukraine?

Since 27 February of this year, the Russian Federation first annexed Crimea before then organizing and facilitating subversive actions in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine.

Russia's activities against Ukraine could be viewed as a type of comprehensive asymmetrical attack. It has not been an easy thing to deal with in conventional military terms (what good are tanks or artillery against human shields and special forces operating within or behind the crowd?), and Ukraine has struggled to find a workable counter-strategy.

One could call it a "soft power" attack, but that would not fully catch the essence of what we have witnessed. Instead, it is more like a multidimensional subversion campaign in which the Russian armed forces were deployed only after the likelihood of a full scale military conflict with Ukraine was minimized. Also visible are elements of insurgency, economic blockade, military surprise attack, corruption, information operations, political and diplomatic pressure, etc. The assault has been truly comprehensive and it struck a Ukrainian society undergoing great internal upheaval with only minimum warning time.

It is especially noteworthy the operation against Ukraine has been designed not like a traditional coercive military operation, but instead quite like a special forces/intelligence operation—with elements of deniability, multiple paths of development, and maximum flexibility. A massive invasion in the eastern part of Ukraine would have been a distinct possibility to seal the annexation – given that the Ukrainian government could be sufficiently undermined. At the same time, if the insurgency did not quickly succeed, the use of mercenaries and proxy forces within Ukraine would provide some form of deniability to Russian leadership.

In Crimea, Russian special forces stormed the local parliament building on the night of 27 February. They installed a puppet government, took over government buildings, and seized key elements of transport infrastructure such as airports, thereby enabling the entry of Russian reinforcements. Fully exploiting the overall confusion and indecisiveness of the new authorities in Kyiv, and open treason in the ranks of Ukrainian military leadership, the Russian troops managed – using human shields, persuasion, coercion and blackmail – to take over the bases and equipment of Ukrainian troops in Crimea. Kyiv was at that time too weak and indecisive even to declare a state of emergency, let alone martial law, on the peninsula. The Crimean puppet government conducted a

referendum on seceding from Ukraine on 16 March, and then the next day petitioned to join the Russian Federation. The Ukrainian group of forces in Crimea ceased to exist on 25-26 March, and amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation — stipulating that Crimea and Sevastopol were parts of the Federation — were published on 11 April.

In April, the turmoil spread to the eastern part of Ukraine. Russia took maximum advantage of the defections of Ukrainian police and security service personnel in order to operate various proxy and mercenary forces in the region. The latter were probably tasked to pave the way for heavier troops. Russia's main force would have deployed once the insurgents carried out local coups and secured reasonably wide public support. For this entire period, a massive group of Russian forces was assembled on the border (after a military exercise that was launched on 26 February 2014), and used to intimidate Ukraine to slow and halt its counterterrorism operations in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.

For a while, it did actually look like a “win-win” situation for the Russian Federation. If Ukrainian forces challenged insurgents actively in the east, Russia would intervene and yet another large chunk of a country could be lost. If Ukrainians remained passive, the eastern part of the country would be lost anyway.

However, not everyone bought into this logic. The military analysis indicates that Putin's Russia's ability to wage a large-scale conflict against a country the size of Ukraine is at least questionable. To prepare and conduct presidential elections on 25 May, Ukrainian leadership opted initially to surround the separatists, and subsequently decided to undertake robust offensive actions. Russia's threats and military exercises on the border were increasingly ignored. At the end of May, Russian troops began an excruciatingly slow withdrawal from Ukraine's frontiers. Moreover, the desired local support for insurgents has not materialized in eastern Ukraine, while military operations in and around Donetsk on 26-28 May demonstrated Kyiv's resolve to defend the country. Crucially, Ukrainian forces showed that they can operate effectively and lethally against terrorists.

As is common in the murky world of intelligence, various actions are taken under cover stories; the enemy is deceived wherever and whenever possible, and if things do not work out quite as expected, one always tries to maintain deniability. All these characteristics are visible in how Russia annexed Crimea and how it has tried to present its military and paramilitary actions. According to Moscow's narrative, Russian actions in Ukraine were simply efforts to defend Ukrainians' right to self-determination and to protect them from fascism.

But just how plausible has this narrative been? The following sections, based only on incontrovertible evidence, should shed some light on how transparently or inconspicuously Russia has managed to act. In order to assess Russia's role

in what has transpired in Ukraine, attention is paid primarily to the following aspects:

- Evidence of the presence and actions of Russian troops in Ukraine;
- Statements of Russia's top leadership on the role of Russian troops in the events in Ukraine;
- Evidence of support to separatists from Russia.

2. Operations in Crimea

27 February 2014: Russian troops stormed the Crimean Supreme Council (parliament) and government buildings (https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=ztuHuSw_4zw and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPHNiTZe_wI)

Ukrainian intelligence confirmed in April that the Crimean parliament was stormed by the 45th Guards Separate Reconnaissance Regiment of Russian Airborne Forces.¹ Footage taken by security cameras shows that the attacking troops were:

- 1) Disciplined and operating together as a cohesive unit;
- 2) Very heavily armed, with camouflaged weapons equipped with optical sights, night vision scopes and silencers/suppressors; subsequently, two weapons that appear to be AGS-17 or AGS-30 automatic grenade launchers were brought in;
- 3) Equipped with military uniforms (some attackers), body armor, and helmets specific to Russian troops;
- 4) Carrying side arms in thigh holsters (some attackers).

All these are trademarks of a capable military unit and make the claim of President Putin (see below) that the building was taken by Crimean self-defense force highly improbable.

An analysis by Finnish experts of the equipment and weapons of the “green men” also supports the presence of the 45th Separate Reconnaissance Regiment in Crimea.²

There is also a leaked video³ that is allegedly a post-action report of the Russian Special Operations Forces' troop No. 0900. It contains the familiar footage from the security cameras of the Crimean parliament and government buildings. However, it is complemented with footage from different angles and from various rooms inside the buildings. Clearly identifiable are PKP “Pecheneg”

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/dmitry.tymchuk/posts/484873874974606>

² <http://www.suomensotilas.fi/en/artikkelit/crimea-invaded-high-readiness-forces-russian-federation>

³ http://ukrstream.tv/ru/videos/zielieni_cholovichki_viklali_v_mieriezhu_vidео_iak_voni_zakh_opliuvati_krim?page=1#.U4YisWeKCcw

machine guns that are used only by Russian, Kyrgyzstan's and Kazakhstan's armed forces.⁴ Finally, the video shows how two attackers, of whom one is in Russian military uniform, hoisted the flag of Russian Federation on top of parliament.

4 March 2014: President Vladimir Putin's press conference
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KrRov8IR4M>)

Claims and statements [particularly important highlights are in **bold**]

What happened in Ukraine [on the Maidan] is merely an anti-constitutional coup and an illegal seizure of power (3:35 on the video)

Of the Ukrainian authorities, only parliament is partially legitimate; all others are not. (11:27)

There is no need to use military force against Ukraine. However, the possibility to do so exists. The large-scale military exercises [conducted in the vicinity of Ukraine since 26 February 2014] **had nothing to do with developments in Ukraine, and an order to return to barracks was issued on 3 March 2014.** (14:05)

Ousted President Yanukovich asked Russia to use force to protect people of Ukraine. Russia sees the spread of fascism, nationalism, anti-Semitism in Ukraine. (14:55)

We [Russian leadership] understand what concerns Ukrainians, Russians, Russian-speaking population of southern and eastern Ukraine. They are concerned by spreading violence and lawlessness. If we see that such lawlessness will arise in the eastern regions, if people will ask for our help – and we already have the request of legitimate President of Ukraine – Russia reserves the right to use all means at its disposal to protect these people. It would be legitimate. (17:00)

Ukraine and Russia are brother nations, and their armed forces are brothers in arms. If things become serious, Ukrainian armed forces will be on the same side with Russian forces (17:50)

The same things are happening in Crimea. People are going to the Ukrainian armed forces and persuading them to submit to demands of the local population. No shots have been fired and the need to use Russian forces in Crimea has been eliminated. Russia has merely strengthened the security of its own units due to the movement of nationalist thugs to Crimea (18:35)

⁴ <http://m.forbes.ru/article.php?id=251676>

The change of government in Crimea has been absolutely legally correct. The Crimean self-defense force was created to prevent the events of Kyiv from being repeated in Crimea (28:55)

The self-defense force has established control over Ukrainians Armed Forces in Crimea. The latter looks like a fortress. There are several dozen S-300 air defense missile launchers and other equipment, and 22,000 Ukrainian troops (29:35)

Only local self-defense troops have been in action in Crimea (30:30)

Russia has not trained the self-defense troops of Crimea (31:25)

Russia is not considering annexation of Crimea. Only the people of Crimea, while having full freedom and security to express their free will, are entitled to decide the future of Crimea. Kosovars had such opportunity, and since then no one has annulled the right for self-determination. (31:30)

I [President Putin] am not worried about the possibility of war. We do not intend to, and will not, fight with Ukrainian people. And even if we decide to use force to protect Ukrainian people, we will stand *behind them* – and I would like to see who in the Ukrainian military would dare to open fire on their own people. We will be standing behind women and children and I would like to see who would dare to give such a command [to open fire]. (34:15)

5 March 2014: Statement of Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ut6rf7-vGA>)

Defence Minister Shoygu also claimed that there were no Russian troops in Crimea, and that he had no idea how armored vehicles with Russian registration plates ended up on the peninsula.

Contrary to the statements of Russia's President and Defense Minister, the presence of Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea was confirmed by Russian soldiers themselves—especially by posting photos of themselves taken in Crimea on social networks. (For example, Sergey Maksimov, a soldier serving in the 346th Separate Reconnaissance Battalion of the Ministry of Interior forces of the Russian Federation,⁵ published photos taken in Ukraine on his VKontakte page.⁶

Moreover, one Russian soldier interviewed in Kerch (his name and rank remained unknown) admitted to a news channel Ukrstream.tv that he and his unit

⁵ This unit has been also called 346th Separate Reconnaissance Brigade of the Southern Military District.

⁶ <http://bloggnet.info/news/2651-snayiper-serja-iz-spetsnaza-ss-rossii-vykladyvaet-vkontakte-svoi-krymskie-foto-skrinshoty.html>

were a part of the Armed Forces of Russian Federation (at 3:20 in the link provided).⁷

Ukrainian news agencies also presented numerous photos of Russian-made GAZ Tiger armored vehicles with Russian license plates in Crimea.⁸ The smaller numbers “21” indicate that the vehicles belong to the Southern Military District (of which the Russian Black Sea Fleet is also a part). Moreover, Tigers have been delivered to Russia’s security forces and to various countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States, Asia, Africa, and Latin America – but not to Ukraine.

Further analysis of these registration plates indicates that some of them belonged to a 4th company (third digit of the plate) of a unit designated “78” (first two digits). In 2012, the vehicles of the same 4th company took part in a rehearsal of a military parade in Moscow.⁹ Apparently, some Tigers were rushed to Crimea in such a hurry that not only were their license plates left on, but their “Guards” emblems were not covered either.¹⁰

An expert analysis of other equipment used by troops appearing in Crimea reveals the following¹¹:

- 1) Some soldiers carried a modification of SVD-S sniper rifles that are used only by the armed forces of Russia and Armenia;
- 2) Soldiers were already wearing clearly identifiable elements of the ultra-modern Russian Ratnik Future Soldier System (altogether made of 10 subsystems with over 40 components) which was scheduled to be delivered to the Russian military beginning in 2014. These elements included:
 - a. Protective goggles that can stop 6 mm shrapnel flying at 350 m/s;
 - b. Body armor;
 - c. Unique communications systems.

5-6 March 2014: The Russian Black Sea Fleet scuttled the decommissioned cruiser *Ochakov* in order to prevent Ukrainian Navy from leaving Donuzlav Bay. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Psy_Z8I2BBI and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgYRYexNaIs>)

It is obvious that without specific permission and extensive assistance, Crimean self-defense forces could not have seized an 8,900-ton decommissioned warship, tow it to a very precise location in order to block the narrow exit channel, and

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0Z8ymyx8A>

⁸ <http://argumentua.com/reportazh/dokazatelstva-cto-tak-nazyvaemaya-samooborona-kryma-eto-spetsvoiska-rossii>

⁹ http://censor.net.ua/video_news/274692/voennaya_tehnika_samooborony_kryma_regulyarno_zadevistvuetsya_v_paradah_na_krasnoyi_ploschadi_videofoto

¹⁰ http://censor.net.ua/photo_news/274104/u_samooborony_kryma_o_kotoroyi_govorit_putin_orujie_sostoyaschee_na_voorujenii_isklyuchitelno_rossiyskoyi

¹¹ <http://m.forbes.ru/article.php?id=251676>

then scuttle it there. (Moreover, three more ships were subsequently sunk at the same location.)¹²

One could try to present scuttling of these ships as an act committed by personnel of the Ukrainian Navy who switched sides and joined the Crimean self-defense forces. In fact, on 2 March 2014 Russian media falsely reported that all Ukrainian ships had hoisted Russian flags, including the frigate *Hetman Sahaydachnyi*, flagship of the Ukrainian fleet.¹³ However, while on 2 March 2014 the commander of Ukrainian Navy, Rear Admiral Denys Berezhovskyi, did indeed defect, the vast majority¹⁴ of naval personnel remained loyal to Ukraine. The Russian Black Sea Fleet seized the last ship—the minesweeper *Cherkasy*—by force only on 25 March 2014.

Thus, without Russia's participation no scuttling would have taken place, and the likelihood of Crimean self-defense forces contributing meaningfully to this action is low.

19 March 2014: Human shields were used to storm the headquarters of the Ukrainian Navy (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Gvft1BF0i4>)

On 18 March 2014 the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense allowed its troops in Crimea to use weapons in self-defense.¹⁵ Generally, a sentry on duty is allowed and obliged, if verbal warnings and warning shots do not halt the assault, to fire upon persons attacking either him or the object he is guarding.

In essence, Kyiv encouraged Ukrainian soldiers to open fire (legitimately) more than two weeks after Russia's coup attack in what was formally still peacetime. Firing upon civilians behaving aggressively or upon Russian troops could have escalated the confrontation to the level of war (see President Putin's statements above), whereas Kyiv had failed to declare an emergency situation and/or martial law in Crimea. Ukrainian commanders realized very clearly the precariousness of their situation and stuck to any non-lethal means at their disposal to keep Russian troops and separatists out of their units for as long as possible.

However, Russian troops took no chances and used human shields to take over the headquarters of the Ukrainian Navy on 19 March. After a couple of weeks of blockade, intimidating, and provoking the Ukrainian personnel that guarded the facility, a mob was assembled to break down the fence and approach the building. Ukrainian military did not open fire on the civilians, who were followed closely by Russian troops. The latter then stormed and took over the facility.

¹² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRS599H1H0U>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoCdBqpy04Y>, <http://vz.ru/news/2014/3/13/676931.html>

¹³ <http://lifeneews.ru/news/128244>, <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/02/03/2014/908465.shtml>

¹⁴ Frigate "Hetman Sahaydachniy" actually never returned to Crimea and sailed directly to Odessa after returning from the counter-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden.

¹⁵ <http://lenta.ru/news/2014/03/18/arm/>

President Putin's calculation that Ukrainians would not shoot their own people was proven correct.

17 April 2014: President Putin admitted that Russian troops were in action in Crimea

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xm3IyyQGmY8>)

“In Crimea, the threats to Russian-speaking population were palpable and clear. That made Crimean people to think about their future and turn to Russia for help. Russia has had no annexation plans and intentions to fight in Crimea. Never. On the contrary, Russia intended to develop relations with Ukraine on the basis of contemporary geopolitical realities. At the same time, we hoped that Russian-speaking people would live in secure environment without any oppression. However, when the threats to people in Crimea arose and there were signs of discrimination, we started to think about what could be done. (10:30)

Everything we did [referendum, disarmament of Ukrainian units, providing for security] was *ad hoc*, but it was accomplished very professionally. Our task was not to act with our armed forces in a traditional manner, but to provide for security and guarantee people the freedom of expression of their free will. However, it would not have been possible without participation of Crimean people, without the expression of their will. (12:38)

In principle, I have said it already, although not so openly, that we had to take measures so as to prevent developments like those in the south eastern part of Ukraine. We had to act so that there would be no tanks, no nationalist combat units and no radicals with automatic weapons. **Therefore our military stood behind the self-defense forces of Crimea.** They [Russian troops] acted very correctly, but also very decisively and professionally. There was no other way to conduct a referendum in an open, honest, dignified manner and help these people to express their opinions. Remember, there were over 20,000 well-armed Ukrainian troops in Crimea. There were no less than 38 launchers of the S-300 air defense system, arms depots and trains loaded with ammunition. We had to protect people even from the possibility of these weapons being used against civilians.” (34:25)

Summary: Russia's narrative, according to which the events in Crimea were driven and accomplished by local residents, simply does not stand up to the test. What we see instead is a swift coup attack carried out by Russian Special Operations Forces supported by the offensive actions of the Black Sea Fleet, in the absence of any sign of the alleged threat of Ukrainian nationalists.

Paradoxically, Russian forces operated exactly as President Putin promised they would – behind the people. They had Crimean separatists establish political cover for the annexation – the referendum – and then used them as human shields

to break the resistance of Ukrainian military. Thus, a numerically significant and heavily-armed Ukrainian force failed to halt the actions of the invaders.

Finally, one should not view what transpired in Crimea as a complete improvisation by Russia and a complete surprise to the Ukrainian military. It was not. A military exercise involving the Black Sea Fleet and almost the same amount of Russian troops that later invaded Crimea was carried out on the peninsula in March 2013.¹⁶ The meaning of these maneuvers was not lost to Ukrainians who conducted a counter-exercise in October 2013. It envisioned search and destruction of “a company-sized enemy infantry unit with armored vehicles that had captured an important government object”.¹⁷ However, when the invasion actually happened, the Ukrainian state was too weak and too disorganized to put up effective and decisive military resistance in Crimea.

3. Operations in eastern Ukraine

It is somewhat harder to find evidence of Russia’s involvement in southern and eastern Ukraine that is as incontrovertible as that for its role in Crimea. Russian activities have been more covert and nuanced. Whereas in Crimea, it was a straightforward coup by Russian special forces with the follow-on support of local separatists, in eastern Ukraine the share of separatists among the population is lower and Ukrainian forces have access to any part of the territory. Moreover, an overt invasion of eastern Ukraine has the potential to increase the will and ability of the Ukrainian population to resist Russian actions. Hence, Russia tried to mobilize support and erode Kyiv’s influence through limited attacks on local government buildings, primarily in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. So far, it has not produced the desired results; separatist commanders complain about the lack of support from local population.¹⁸

What facts suggest that Russia initiates, supports and sustains the separatist activities in eastern Ukraine?

- 1) Signature weapons that have come from Russia i.e. separatists have received them most likely from Russia or Russia’s proxies:
 - a. The RPG-26 grenade launcher that is produced in Russia, and used by Russia, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan and Transnistria¹⁹;
 - b. Polish Grom man-portable air-defense systems (quite likely seized by Russian troops in Georgia in 2008)²⁰;

¹⁶ <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/298236>

¹⁷ <http://politikus.ru/events/7139-vnezapnye-ucheniya-v-krymu.html>

¹⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_k6xxDuc1w

¹⁹ <http://sprotyv.info/ru/news/225-terroristy-na-donbasse-ispolzuyut-granatometry-zavezennye-iz-rossii>, <http://weaponsystems.net/weapon.php?weapon=BB04%20-%20RPG-26>

²⁰ <http://sprotyv.info/ru/news/459-kreml-vooruzhaet-terroristov-oruzhiem-zahvachennym-vo-vremya-voyny-v-gruzii>

- c. Weapons captured by Russian troops from Ukrainian forces in Crimea in March²¹.
- 2) Clearly identified people who have come from Russia to fight in Ukraine:
- a. Commander of separatist armed formations **Igor Girkin**, aka Igor Strelkov, aka “Strelkov” (meaning roughly “rifleman”.) The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has claimed that he is a colonel of the GRU (Russia’s military intelligence agency), but this issue remains unclear. However, it has been conclusively proven that Girkin is a Russian citizen who previously resided in Moscow²²;
 - b. Former officer of the Russian Airborne Forces and FSB instructor **Sergey Zhdanovich**. He was killed in action in Donetsk airport on 26-27 May. He was a veteran of Afghanistan and Chechen Wars, former instructor in the Centre of Special Operations of FSB. Right before he arrived in Ukraine he was called up to refresher courses in Rostov²³;
 - c. **Chechens**, fighting in the so-called Vostok [east] Battalion. The original battalion was disbanded in November 2008. Chechens have openly admitted that they are police officers from Grozny. After the battles in Donetsk on 26-27 May, it was reported that 35-45 coffins arrived in Chechnya²⁴;
 - d. **Ossetians** from South Ossetia. They have been mentioned in connection with Slavyansk and Donetsk²⁵;
 - e. **Cossack separatists from Crimea** who have openly admitted who they are²⁶.

It has been much harder to identify Russian Special Operations Forces in eastern Ukraine. General Breedlove has pointed out that some of the separatist units operating there have exhibited signs of good training and military skills²⁷:

- 1) The pro-Russian “activists” in eastern Ukraine exhibit tell-tale military training and equipment and work together in a way that is consistent with troops who are part of a long-standing unit, rather than a newly-formed local militia;

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/dmitry.tymchuk/posts/504725369656123>

²² <http://grani.ru/Politics/World/Europe/Ukraine/m.228414.html>,
<http://www.unian.net/politics/912749-jurnalistyi-v-moskve-pobyivali-doma-u-rossiyskogo-diversanta-girkina-strelkova.html>

²³ <http://www.unian.net/politics/923197-v-boyu-za-aeroport-donetska-byil-unichtojen-instruktor-fsb.html>

²⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MuolIqMxvI>, <http://argumentua.com/novosti/smi-na-kavkaze-soobshchayut-o-dostavlennykh-v-chechnyu-telakh-ubitykh-v-ukraine-boevikov>

²⁵ http://gazeta.ua/ru/articles/np/_v-internete-poyavilos-video-osetinskih-boevikov-v-donecke/556922

²⁶ <http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/25507401/yavlyayutsya-li-zelenye-chelovechki-na-vostoke-ukrainy>

²⁷ <http://www.aco.nato.int/saceur2013/blog/who-are-the-men-behind-the-masks.aspx>

- 2) The weapon handling discipline and professional behavior of these forces is consistent with a trained military force. Rifle muzzles are pointed down, and fingers are not placed on triggers, but rather laid across trigger mechanisms;
- 3) Coordinated use of tear gas and stun grenades against targeted buildings indicates a level of training beyond that of a recently-formed militia;
- 4) Video of these forces at checkpoints shows they are attentive, on their feet, focused on their security tasks, and under control of an apparent leader. This contrasts with typical militia or mob checkpoints, at which it is common to see people sitting, smoking, and so forth;
- 5) The way these forces target government buildings, hit them in coordinated strikes, and quickly secure the surrounding area with roadblocks and barricades is similar to what we saw in Crimea. Again, this is indicative of a professional military force, acting under coherent direction and leadership, not a spontaneous militia.

However, these units do not use the tell-tale equipment of Russian special operations forces that was spotted in Crimea. The current lack of a visible presence of Russian special forces can also be explained by the limited support of local population to separatists, and the counter-terrorist operations of the Ukrainian authorities. It has been claimed that Russian special forces were present in eastern Ukraine, but pulled back when Ukrainian troops began launching their first serious actions against Slovyansk.²⁸

Summary: Russia's narrative that the conflict in the eastern Ukraine is nothing but a fight of local people for the right of self-determination and to protect themselves from fascism in Ukraine does not stand up to the test either. The involvement of combatants and the flow of weapons from Russia are way too extensive to be plausibly denied, and to be organized privately. It is impossible to imagine all these people and weapons to cross the border without the assistance of Russian border guard or "windows" created by Russian intelligence/security services. Hence, Russia is sustaining the conflict in Ukraine.

However, the involvement of Russia's active military personnel in fighting is well masked - if it exists at all presently. Russian special forces might have been used to initiate the separatist activities – exploiting defections of tens of thousands of Ukrainian police and security officers – and withdrawn afterwards. It is quite likely that retired/overtly retired high-level professionals like Zhdanovich are used to lead and coordinate the activities of separatist units. According to Ukrainian sources, the spearhead of separatist fighting strength²⁹ in the eastern Ukraine presently comprises elements that defected to the

²⁸ http://news.liga.net/news/politics/1383072-diversantam_v_slavyanske_prikazano_otkhodit_iz_goroda_tymchuk.htm

²⁹ The total number of separatist fighters has been estimated to be around 20,000: http://censor.net.ua/video_news/287050/v_Luhanskoyi_oblasti_bolshe_5_tysyach_voorujenny_h_terroristov_v_donetskoyi_oblasti_ih_vtroe_bolshe_lutsenko

separatists (a Crimean Alfa unit of the SBU and a Berkut special-police detachment) as well as the Chechens.³⁰

³⁰ <http://www.segodnya.ua/regions/donetsk/semenchenko-osnovnaya-sila-terroristov-bojcy-krymskoy-alfy-berkut-i-chechency-524336.html>