



## Can U.N. peacekeeping operation bring stability in Donbas?

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Over the last four years, Ukraine has experienced an unprecedented challenge to its sovereignty posed by the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the continuing escalations in the Donbas, in which local separatists aided by regular Russian forces are fighting against regular Ukrainian army. According to many Western experts, the only solution for the reconciliation and further integration of the occupied territories must be a U.N. peacekeeping mission in Donbas. Former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, for example, has proposed a peacekeeping force of some 20,000 soldiers from non-NATO countries, and 4,000 more police, help resolve the crisis in Ukraine<sup>1</sup>.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko was the first to publicly propose peacekeepers be deployed to eastern Ukraine, immediately following the signing of the Minsk-2 ceasefire agreement in February 2015<sup>2</sup>. At that time, Poroshenko hoped peacekeepers would stop military escalation, as the Russian army had aggressively invaded Ukrainian territory and still could take to the offensive. Poroshenko urged that U.N. mission should have the mandate to operate across the whole territory of Donbas. This would enable access for international observers and peacekeepers to monitor of Ukraine's internationally recognized border with Russia, and ensure compliance with the Minsk-2 protocol. Needless to say, that proposal was almost immediately rejected by Kremlin<sup>3</sup>.

Russia later proposed their own plan for a U.N. peacekeeping operation in Donbas, in September 2017. According to that proposal the operation's primary mission should be to guard members of the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observer mission in Donbas which members may be threatened from both sides. Whereas Poroshenko had proposed putting the peacekeepers on the Russian border, the Russian proposal was to place the peacekeepers on the front lines between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces. According to the proposal, future

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-peacekeepers/ukraine-crisis-needs-20000-strong-u-n-force-report-idUSKBN1FW168>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/21b8f98e-b2a5-11e4-b234-00144feab7de>

<sup>3</sup> <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-proposal-reopens-donbas-un-peacekeepers-debate/>

negotiations regarding U.N. peacekeepers would be conducted directly with the leaders of the separatist “republics” in Donbas<sup>4</sup>.

In February Swedish defense minister Peter Hultqvist confirmed that his country would be open to providing troops to a U.N. peacekeeping mission if Russia and the West agreed.<sup>5</sup> Finland, Austria, Kazakhstan and other non-NATO members may also join this initiative providing their troops for securing peace and stability in the region.

These proposals for a U.N. peacekeeping operation in Donbas raise more questions than they answer. How would the Kremlin proposal of peacekeepers satisfy the requirements of the Minsk-2 agreement, for example, if Russian troops will remain on Ukrainian soil even after the peacekeepers arrive? What would happen to the approximately 35,000 armed Russian and separatist troops operating in the Donbas? Would it be possible to conduct free and fair elections in the Donbas while they were present? If they were to be granted amnesty, who exactly would be held responsible for the start of the war in 2014, and how could this be explained to the families of the thousands of Ukrainians who have died fighting against separatism in the Donbas?

All of these questions need to be answered before U.N. peacekeepers can be sent to Donbas.

The Kremlin will insist on its version of peacekeeping operations, and will not accept any other alternatives either from Kyiv or the West. But there are many problems with the Russian plan. Firstly, it will allow Russia to avoid withdrawing its troops and separatists from the Donbas for the foreseeable future. A withdrawal is unacceptable, for Putin personally, it would remind him of the Soviet army’s withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 right before the collapse of the USSR. Therefore, the Kremlin has suggested direct negotiations with the separatist “republics,” which will legitimate these states in the eyes of the international community and let me avoid withdrawal.

Secondly, any peacekeeping operation that doesn’t have a mandate to operate on the whole territory of Donbas, including along the Russo-Ukrainian border, doesn’t make sense. If it cannot watch the border, the Russian regular army will remain illegally present on Russian territory, and the Kremlin will be able to continue to supply, advise and aid separatists.

Thirdly, the presence of Russian and separatists forces in eastern Ukraine will prevent the conduct of elections in that territory which meet Ukrainian law and international standards. Russian separatists and their affiliates will keep international observers, who can prevent falsifications and manipulations of the elections, out. There have already been multiple examples of separatists harassing OSCE monitors and keeping them from working in occupied territories<sup>6</sup>.

Fourthly, Ukraine would also have a hard time accepting or supporting Russia’s proposed peacekeeping plan. Ukrainian veterans and far-right organizations would likely speak out angrily against the Ukrainian legislature granting “special status” to the separatist republics, or granting amnesty to separatists who “didn’t commit serious crimes,” as the Minsk-2 agreement promises.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-20/putin-s-plan-for-ukraine-peacekeepers-gets-cool-reception>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.dw.com/en/sweden-says-its-open-to-leading-un-peacekeeping-mission-in-ukraine/a-42631517>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.osce.org/permanent-council/304316?download=true>

Various radical organizations have already protested this plan for reconciliation with separatists<sup>7</sup>. If the Rada tried to vote for such a controversial bill, it would spark street protests and mass unrest, as previously happened in 2015<sup>8</sup>.

From a political perspective peacekeeping operation initiated by the Western allies would be beneficial for official Kyiv since it will bring more support for local authorities in terms of the upcoming presidential and then parliamentary elections which are scheduled on the next year. Either politician or party which will be able bring peace to Donbas will receive support from voters from most of Ukrainian regions.

Since country's Independence in 1991 and even without being member of NATO Ukrainian military forces regularly participated in the various peacekeeping missions from Kosovo to Sierra Leone and Iraq. At this point there is no military solution for Donbas since both sides have entrenched heavily on their positions. Therefore the West should conduct more pressure on Kremlin and convince it to accept a U.N. peacekeeping operation on the Western conditions. Only after "blue helmets" would be able to operate on whole territory of Donbas it would be possible to organize free and fair elections in that regions with minimal risks for civilians, militaries and members of the international monitoring missions who would observe election process as it was after liberation of Slovyansk and Kramatorsk which were occupied by Russian separatist in 2014.

In the end of the day Putin has to review his version of peacekeeping mission which if organized in proper way have all chances to bring stability in Donbas.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/11834839/Kiev-protests-against-separatists-turn-violent-as-grenade-thrown-at-police.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/kyiv-post-plus/third-servicemen-dies-from-rada-grenade-attack-396940.html>