



Russian Offensive in Ukraine Unlikely, but Russian Disinformation Operation Pressures Kyiv To Make Concessions

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Key Takeaway: *The Kremlin launched a disinformation campaign against Ukraine in early March that could support renewed Russian offensive conventional operations in 2021, but Russia is unlikely to launch offensive operations in the coming weeks. Russian proxies in eastern Ukraine deployed to full combat readiness on March 16. Despite that potential indicator of a possible operation, the Russian military is not postured to support an imminent offensive. The Kremlin's disinformation campaign may be intended to pressure Ukraine into engaging in negotiations on unfavorable terms or to set conditions for a Russian escalation in late spring 2021 or both. ISW will continue to assess indicators of a potential Russian escalation and monitor the Kremlin's ongoing disinformation campaign.*

Russia's proxy forces in eastern Ukraine deployed to full combat readiness on March 16, 2021. Ukrainian intelligence reported Russia's proxy forces in occupied Donetsk and Luhansk deployed to the highest degree of combat readiness, withdrew personnel from vacations early, and replenished ammunition for front line units on March 16.¹ Russian proxies have increased their pace of readiness drills since early March.² Ukrainian intelligence and independent reporting confirm that Russia's proxies are currently improving their defensive positions.³

The Russian military has not set the conditions necessary to support offensive operations and an imminent escalation is unlikely. Russia is conducting an annual Russian Airborne (VDV) exercise in Crimea from March 16-19, 2021, involving 2,000 troops, but this exercise is likely preplanned and has occurred in mid-March every year since 2017.⁴ ISW has not observed reporting of any other Russian forces redeploying or conducting snap exercises near Ukraine in recent weeks. Russia has not deployed additional combat assets into Donbas, such as artillery and armor units, to support an escalation. The weather in eastern Ukraine is currently poor and unsuited to offensive operations.⁵ Ukrainian intelligence characterizes ongoing Russian proxy activity as preparations for "provoking tension" and "provocative action," not a new offensive.⁶ Increased readiness drills and improved defensive positions in the absence of necessary preparations for offensive action indicate an imminent escalation is unlikely. Proxy leaders may have taken defensive measures around the anniversary of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2014, amid annual intense rhetoric from Ukraine and Russia. Russian proxies are likely additionally supporting an ongoing Kremlin information campaign against Ukraine.

The Kremlin began a disinformation campaign in early March claiming Ukraine is preparing to launch an offensive against Donbas later in spring 2021. The Kremlin-funded Federal News Agency likely originated this false narrative on March 1, 2021, by distorting a Ukrainian military analyst's discussion of "Western instructors"

assisting new Ukrainian urban warfare training centers. The Federal News Agency claimed these new centers indicated an imminent Ukrainian offensive against occupied Donbas in spring 2021.⁷ Retired Russian Colonel Viktor Baranets stated on March 3 that Ukraine is likely preparing for an offensive in mid-May and after the spring thaw at the earliest.⁸ Baranets is an unofficial mouthpiece for the Russian military and often acts as a leading indicator for Russian intent.⁹ Russia's proxies in Donetsk issued statements warning of a possible "new cycle of escalation" by Ukraine in spring 2021 on March 4 and 16.¹⁰

The Kremlin boosted this narrative on March 4. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated Russia is concerned about a potential Ukrainian escalation and renewed force deployments.¹¹ Russian representative to the OSCE Alexander Lukashovich claimed the Ukrainian military is deploying additional forces to Donbas and training for offensive operations—misquoting the same Ukrainian analyst cited by the Federal News Agency—and accused Ukraine of stalling negotiations with Russia to buy time to prepare for offensive action.¹² Kremlin representatives and state-run media have continued to amplify this narrative throughout March 2021. Director Andrei Kortunov of the Russian International Affairs Council, a key Kremlin-run think tank, forecasted Ukraine will escalate the Donbas conflict "in the near future" on March 14.¹³ Russian envoy to Ukraine Boris Gryzlov claimed Ukraine continues to deploy additional troops to Donbas and seeks a pretext for escalation on March 17.¹⁴

The Kremlin's disinformation campaign may be intended to pressure Ukrainian President Zelensky into renewed unfavorable negotiations with the Kremlin or direct engagement with Russian proxies. Kremlin representatives and media outlets have accused Ukrainian President Zelensky of preparing for an offensive due to his unwillingness to continue negotiations with Russia. Ukraine has refrained from direct engagement with Russia's proxies in Donbas to avoid legitimizing them as independent actors through direct engagement.¹⁵ Russian envoy Gryzlov accused Ukraine of preparing an escalation to break the "impasse" on negotiations and claimed Ukraine's only alternative to a military escalation is direct talks with Russian proxies.¹⁶ Lukashovich similarly accused Ukraine of preparing an escalation to avoid what the Kremlin frames as Kyiv's "commitment" to begin direct engagement with Russian proxies in Donbas.¹⁷ Russia's proxy authorities in Donetsk accused Ukraine of seeking a forceful end to the conflict instead of negotiations on March 17.¹⁸ The Kremlin previously failed to coerce Ukraine into direct talks with Russian proxies in May 2020 through an information campaign and increased military pressure—including raising its proxies to full combat readiness on May 19, 2020.¹⁹ The Kremlin may seek to use Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's 2019 election promise to end the war in Donbas to pressure him into entering further Kremlin-favorable negotiations.²⁰

The Kremlin's disinformation campaign may be setting conditions for its own kinetic escalation in spring 2021. The Kremlin routinely accuses Ukraine of refusing to consider Russia-favorable negotiations and of perpetuating the conflict in eastern Ukraine. However, claims emanating directly from the Kremlin overtly accusing Ukraine of preparing for an offensive are unusual. Russian claims of a Ukrainian offensive in May might indicate that Russian leaders intend to conduct a kinetic escalation in late spring 2021. The Kremlin likely intends to build its disinformation campaign over several months and may seek to provoke Ukrainian forces into action Russia that can frame as a justification for a renewed offensive against Ukraine.

ISW will continue to monitor the situation and assess indicators of a potential Russian escalation. Russia has not deployed the forces necessary for a kinetic escalation as of late March but may do so in the coming weeks. ISW will monitor and report on indicators—including Russian military exercises, command changes, deployment of additional assets to Donbas, and heightened rhetoric—of a Russian escalation. ISW will additionally continue to monitor the Kremlin's disinformation campaign against Ukraine, including its likely triggers and objectives.

¹ ["Summary of the Press Service of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine on the Situation in the Area of the Joint Forces Operation,"] Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, March 16, 2021, <https://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2021/03/16/zvedennya-pressluzhbi-minoboroni-ukraini-shhodo-obstanovki-v-rajoni-provedennya-operacii-obednanih-sil/>.

² Eastern Human Rights Group, Facebook, March 8, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/east.hr.group/posts/2944279412497906>; ["DNR Allowed to Open Pre-emptive Fire on Ukrainian Positions in Donbas,"] RBC, March 3, 2021, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/603f4c2a9a7947a584cd466d>; ["The Armed Formations of Ukraine Continue to Violate the Complex of Additional

Measures to Control Compliance with the Armistice, During the Meeting of the Contact Groups,"] DNR Army, March 3, 2021, <http://armiyadnr dot su/news/ekstrennoe-zayavlenie-oficialnogo-predstavatelya-nm-dnr-257>.

³ Joint Forces Operation, *Facebook*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/pressjfo.news/posts/1079885725837376>; Alexander Demchenko, ["Russian Journalist Showed Strengthening of Fighters near Donetsk,"] *Radio Svoboda*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/slakov-staromykhaylivka-donetsk/31154191.html>.

⁴ ["As Part of the Command Post of the Novorossiysk Airborne Unit, the Paratroopers Began to Plan Military Operations,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, March 16, 2021, <https://structure.mil dot ru/structure/okruga/south/news/more.htm?id=12349219@egNews>; ["Command and Staff Exercises of the Airborne Forces with the Landing of Air and Sea Assault Forces will be Held in Crimea and the Volgograd Region,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, March 26, 2020, https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12282420@egNews; ["A Large-Scale Exercise of the Airborne Forces Began in Crimea,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, March 25, 2019, https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12222966@egNews; ["In Crimea, a Tactical Exercise Began with an Airborne Assault Battalion of the Novorossiysk Airborne Unit,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, March 13, 2018, https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12166534@egNews; ["For the First Time in Crimea, a Large-Scale Command-Staff Exercise with Command and Control Bodies and Subunits of Three Airborne Units is Being Held,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, March 20, 2017, https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12115116@egNews.

⁵ "Donetsk, Ukraine Weather Forecast," *Weather.com*, March 18, 2021, <https://weather.com/weather/tenday/1/Donetsk+Donetsk+Ukraine?canonicalCityId=75d657e7bfd13bef4b16d01854b11965bc0dde14d1d358d24fecdf1a67103fdd>; "Luhansk, Ukraine Weather Forecast," *Weather.com* March 18, 2021, <https://weather.com/weather/tenday/1/Luhansk+Luhansk+Ukraine?canonicalCityId=6ea53f313788dafa1a7d37662995d12883da507e424586f745297c60a34f93ac1>.

⁶ ["Summary of the Press Service of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine on the Situation in the Area of the Joint Forces Operation,"] Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, March 16, 2021, <https://www.mil.gov dot ua/news/2021/03/16/zvedennya-pressluzhbi-minoboroni-ukraini-shhodo-obstanovki-v-rajoni-provedennya-operacii-obednanih-sil/>; Joint Forces Operation, *Facebook*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/pressjfo.news/posts/1079885725837376>.

⁷ ["Kyiv Trains Soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine for the "Spring" Offensive in Donbas,"] Federal News Agency, March 1, 2021, <https://ria dot ru/1396403-kyiv-nataskivaet-boicov-vsu-dlya-vesennego-nastupleniya-na-donbass>; Vladislav Krasinsky, ["On the Edge of the World: What is Happening in Donbas and is Ukraine Ready for 'Putin's Response,'] *RBK Ukraine*, March 1, 2021, <https://daily.rbc dot ua/rus/show/grani-mira-proishodit-donbasse-gotova-ukraina-1614536137.html>.

⁸ Viktor Baranets, ["When Will the War Start in Donbas and How Will it End,"] *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.kp dot ru/daily/27248/4377008/>.

⁹ For example, Baranets discussed impending Russian military exercises in Belarus before their official announcement in late 2020. George Barros and Mason Clark, "Belarus Warning Update: he Kremlin will Likely Use October Military Exercises to Advance its Hybrid War in Belarus,"] *Institute for the Study of War*, October 8, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-will-likely-use-october-military-exercises-advance-its>.

¹⁰ DNR Foreign Ministry, *Telegram*, March 4, 2021, https://t dot me/mid_dnr/1281; ["The DNR Reports on the Aggravation of the Situation Along the Entire Line of Contact in Donbas,"] TASS, March 16, 2021, <https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/10918875>.

¹¹ ["The Rise of Tensions in Donbas Worries the Kremlin,"] *Interfax*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.interfax dot ru/russia/754516>.

¹² ["Speech by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE A.K. Lukashovich at the Online Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, Vienna, 4 March 2021,"] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 4, 2021, https://www.mid dot ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4607224.

¹³ ["The Expert did not Rule Out Escalation in Donbas in the Near Future,"] TASS, March 14, 2021, <https://tass dot ru/politika/10900609>.

¹⁴ ["Gryzlov: Ukraine is Deploying New Forces and Means to the Contact Line in Donbas,"] TASS, March 17, 2021, <https://tass dot ru/politika/10929895>.

¹⁵ George Barros and Nataliya Bugayova with Mason Clark, "Russia in Review: Kremlin Escalates in Ukraine while Playing Peacemaker," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 1, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-kremlin-escalates-ukraine-while-playing-peacemaker>.

¹⁶ ["Gryzlov: Ukraine is Deploying New Forces and Means to the Contact Line in Donbas,"] TASS, March 17, 2021, <https://tass dot ru/politika/10929895>.

¹⁷ ["Speech by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE A.K. Lukashovich at the Online Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, Vienna, 4 March 2021,"] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 4, 2021, https://www.mid dot ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4607224.

¹⁸ ["Kyiv Aims at War Instead of Peaceful Solution to the Conflict in Donbas - DPR Delegation in KG,"] *Donetsk News Agency*, March 17, 2021, <https://dan-news dot info/politics/kyiv-nacelen-voynu-vmesto-mirnogo-reshenija-konflikta-v-donbasse-delegacija-dnr-v-kg.html>.

¹⁹ George Barros and Nataliya Bugayova with Mason Clark, "Russia in Review: Kremlin Escalates in Ukraine while Playing Peacemaker," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 1, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-kremlin-escalates-ukraine-while-playing-peacemaker>.

²⁰ Nataliya Bugayova, "Ukraine's New President: The Stakes for Ukraine and the West," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 22, 2019, <http://www.iswresearch.org/2019/04/ukraines-new-president-stakes-for.html>.