



# Crimea and the Kremlin: From Plan “A” to Plan “B”

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<sup>1</sup> Reconstructing events in east Ukraine and the rationale behind them.

On 15 March, Crimea marked the first anniversary of the referendum on whether it wanted to be incorporated as part of Russia. Shortly before, Vladimir Putin signed a decree instituting a new national holiday: Special Operations Forces Day. This is to be celebrated on 27 February, the day in 2014 when the "little green men" embarked on their operation to seize key facilities in Crimea. The day before the announcement, Russian television aired a film titled "Crimea: the Path Back to the Homeland", in which Putin describes taking the decision to begin the operation to annex the peninsula. For all that, certain details about the operation and the Russian president's motives remain obscure.

We could do worse than get the answer to the question of why Putin decided to seize Crimea from the horse's mouth, from Putin's own speeches. He had listed his grievances at some length in a speech in the Kremlin on 18 March 2014. Not for the first time, he blamed the United States for "destroying the world order" and, in his view, stage-managing a whole succession of "coloured" revolutions. His main complaint was about NATO's eastward expansion, "moving up military infrastructure to our borders." Because of this, he argued, "we have every reason to believe that the notorious policy of containment of Russia, pursued in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, continues to this day. There are constant attempts to drive us into a corner because we take an independent position, because we defend it, because we call a spade a spade, because we do not dissemble. There is a limit to everything, however, and in the case of Ukraine our Western partners crossed a line. They behaved uncouthly, irresponsibly, and unprofessionally." Here Putin came to his principal concern: "We have heard statements being made in Kiev about the early entry of Ukraine into NATO. What implications would that have for Crimea and Sevastopol? The NATO fleet would turn up in this city, with its glorious Russian military past. The entire south of Russia would be under, not an ephemeral but a very specific threat." "But," Putin stated emphatically, "we oppose any suggestion that a military alliance, – and for all its internal changes, NATO remains a military organization, – should rule the roost on the other side of our fence, right next to our home or on what historically were our territories. I simply do not see us going as guests to visit NATO sailors in Sevastopol."

Putin has been peddling this topic at least since his Munich speech of 10 February 2007, when the grievances were much the same: "At exactly the same time, so-called US light forward bases

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for the Russian Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. It can be accessed at, Voronov, V. 'Krim i Kreml': ot plana "A" k planu "B", *svoboda.org*, 15 March 2015, available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26899899.html>

are appearing in Bulgaria and Romania. We find NATO moving its frontline forces up to our borders." "This is a serious challenge," and so "We have every right to ask bluntly who this expansion is targeted against." Putin then went on to accuse NATO of breaking a promise, which he claimed had been made by its Secretary General back on 17 May 1990, not to expand the alliance further to the east. "Where are those undertakings now?"

This is a claim Putin has repeated, for instance at a meeting of the Valdai discussion club on 19 September 2013: "At one time we were promised that NATO would not expand beyond the eastern boundary of the former Federal Republic of Germany. That is what they said. It was a direct promise to Gorbachev, but not written down anywhere. And where is NATO now? Where is the border? We were cheated, and that is all there is to it."

Putin can talk endlessly about the expansion of NATO as the principal threat to Russia: "Who are NATO's actions targeted against? Why is it expanding up to our borders?" (17 April 2014). "And now what do we see? They have staged a coup d'état! They don't even want to talk to us any longer. What are we supposed to think? The next step is for Ukraine to join NATO ... So, tomorrow Ukraine might be in NATO, and the day after we might find US anti-missile defence systems deployed there" (23 May 2014).

All this is now enshrined in the "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation", an official document approved on 25 December 2014, which lists among military risks and threats facing Russia "movement of the military infrastructure of NATO member countries closer to the borders of the Russian Federation, including through further expansion of the bloc"; and, most tellingly, "the establishment in states contiguous with the Russian Federation, including as a result of the overthrow of legitimate government institutions, of regimes whose policies threaten the interests of the Russian Federation."

It is easy to poke fun at the fear that NATO tanks might appear in Kyiv and Kharkiv, but the Kremlin genuinely feared that the eastern border of Ukraine would become the eastern border of NATO. If the buffer zone between Russia and NATO disappears, Russia's entire current military strategy is thrown into disarray. It was no coincidence that Russian military experts expressed alarm, even before the Ukrainian events, that the flight time of missiles from Kharkiv to Moscow is very different from the time they would take to reach Moscow from Europe or the Mediterranean. Military expert Sergey Anuchin pointed out that "the critically brief flight time of US missiles (5-6 minutes) would render a retaliatory Russian strike almost impossible, because the time required to take that decision is at least 4 minutes. A massive strike on decision-making centres, control points and our missile sites could almost guarantee to take most of them out."

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How far these fears are justified is a matter for debate, but there is no doubt that this is genuinely a sensitive issue for the Kremlin.

Perhaps, though, the most important point is that Crimea has only ever been of interest to Moscow as a major naval base. Although an effort is made not to talk about it publicly, the fact is that Crimea, and more specifically, Sevastopol with its bays and infrastructure, is the only feasible place for the Russian Black Sea Fleet to be based. There simply are no other bays suitable for year-round stationing of warships in the Black Sea. This, incidentally, was publicly admitted by Admiral Georgij Alafuzoff, director of the European Union's Military Staff Intelligence Directorate and a former head of Finnish military intelligence.

In an excerpt from an interview published on the Finnish Yle.fi portal, Alafuzoff said Russia had effectively no alternative military base on the Black Sea. Accordingly, he found the Russian military's interest in Crimea no surprise, and recognized that the "possible annexation of Crimea by Russia would ease the situation of the military and make it possible to exploit the whole territory also for military purposes." We need not concern ourselves with what exactly the Finnish intelligence chief meant by that, but the reality is that the Russian Black Sea Fleet has nowhere else to go.

It is not ideal to have their fleet concentrated in, to all intents and purposes, a single bay in the Black Sea (even though the bay at Sevastopol is extremely well adapted to the role, consisting of a further 19 coves, extending 8 kilometres into the peninsula, and providing about 300 berths. There are another 17 usable bays at Sevastopol alone. Nevertheless, aware of the problem, attempts have been made periodically since the days of the Russian Empire to create alternative bases for the fleet on the Caucasian coast.

These have come to nothing for a variety of reasons, including the natural environment. The terrain is unsuitable in terms of the depth of the seabed, a dearth of usable bays where quays could be built and berths equipped, and because of climatic conditions. Any port in the Caucasus would need a fully-fledged naval infrastructure created from scratch, complete with new transport centres and a system of depots to provide the fleet with such operational necessities as fuel and ammunition, ship repair facilities, accommodation and, in accordance with basic military theory, protective air cover and air defence systems.

Without the Black Sea Fleet, the whole southern underbelly of Russia would be exposed, or so I have been told by a succession of admirals over the past 20 years. Can we doubt that the Kremlin sees this as the only valid assessment?

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## Without a Fight

The invasion of Crimea was evidently not a purely military undertaking but a special operation, even an intelligence agency-led operation in the traditions of the never-departed KGB, but using “polite people” from the army’s special forces. The technical side was at first fascinating. What was shown of it, at least, looked like a perfect military exercise, a textbook case of coherent planning. On 27 February 2014 the Supreme Soviet in Simferopol was captured, together with checkpoints on the Isthmus of Perekop and Chonhar Peninsula, and Sevastopol’s Belbek Airport. On 28 February Simferopol Airport was seized and a number of Ukrainian military units blocked. On 1 March the Kerch Strait ferry was taken and an air defence missile regiment in Yevpatoria captured. In Feodosia a Ukrainian battalion of marines was blockaded. And so on.

All these special operations were clearly based on the assumption that the Ukrainian army would offer no armed resistance. The special operations troops blockading and then capturing objectives in Crimea were clearly very confident that not a single shot would be fired. This would otherwise have been a reckless undertaking. No matter how well equipped and trained the special forces might be, they were operating in relatively small groups and only lightly armed. In videos made at the time, incompetence and negligence in the deployment of the “polite people” are often glaringly obvious. If they had encountered any armed resistance, let alone the use of heavy weaponry, the picture would have been very different.

So, was it known for a fact that there would be no counter-fire? Was that written into the plan? Needless to say, there was nothing spontaneous or ad hoc about the invasion. The apparent straightforwardness and technical competence is in itself the clearest evidence that this was no improvisation: there had been long and meticulous preparations. An operation of this sort cannot be rehearsed in a week or two, or even in two or three months. The obvious conclusion is that events in Kyiv had nothing to do the invasion, beyond providing a convenient excuse for something planned long before any Maidan protests.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Dmytro Tymchuk, director of the Ukrainian Centre for Military Policy Studies, the Russian Defence Ministry carried out a re-selection of military personnel in Crimea as long ago as 2012-13. Russia’s troops there were purged of anyone of Ukrainian origin or with family ties to Ukraine. They were sent to complete their service in other regions of Russia, and anyone unwilling to move was discharged from the Army. By the time Crimea was invaded, only 2-3% of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet officers were Ukrainian or had Ukrainian relatives, as against some 17% previously. When the “polite people” moved their

masks, it could be seen that the soldiers forming the backbone of Russian units deployed to Crimea were almost all instantly recognisable as non-Slavic.

Be that as it may, this was a surprise attack. It was entirely free of accidental or deliberate leaking of information, for the first time in the history of post-Soviet Russia (with the exception, of course, of the surprise occupation in June 1999 of the airport in Priština, the capital of Kosovo). If we look back, however, we can find signs of a propaganda "softening up". In April 2008 an article titled "Operation Clockwork Orange" appeared in the internet *Russian Journal*, founded by Kremlin spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky. It is, in effect, a blueprint for the future occupation of Ukraine by Russian troops. "After announcing the need to improve the security of vulnerable targets, Russia conducts an amphibious operation with marines to occupy key elements of the Crimean infrastructure: airports, ports, road junctions. Ukrainian units in Crimea are not attacked directly unless they resist. Because of vacillation by the Kiev authorities there is no possibility of serious resistance," the author prophesies. He continues, "Kiev will not send in troops to 'liberate' the peninsula at the cost of exposing other fronts. The Kiev government has never enjoyed the slightest support in Crimea, and has maintained a toehold there only by exercising naked administrative power." The author predicts "positive reaction on the part of the Russian majority in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, as well as a rapid reorientation of local elites"; "a referendum on independence for the Crimean Republic; and probably, after a few years, formation of an alliance between Crimea and Russia or even incorporation into Russia ... if at the time Moscow decides that is politically the logical thing to do."

As we see, everything has happened in accordance with this scenario, except that the Kremlin decided not to bother waiting those "few years" and helped itself to its booty sooner rather than later. In the same article there are predictions of operations also in the east and southeast of Ukraine, with the Russian-speaking police and Russian-speaking soldiers of the Ukrainian Army refusing to resist; and benefitting from the "friendly disposition of the local population", and so on. The scenario even envisages the capturing of Kyiv and the use of nuclear weapons. I quote: "A demonstrative aerial nuclear explosion carried out at night in the stratosphere in the southern part of the Pripjat marshes would be enormously helpful in this event."

Reading the article, you feel this scenario was the basis on which the special operation was planned! There is even coincidence of the terminology of Putin today and the author then, including identical use of the "Russian world" concept. It would not surprise me if some day it was revealed that this scenario from the Kremlin's spin doctors shaped the plan adopted by Putin's strategists.

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## Treachery of the Generals

Military analyst Alexander Goltz, commenting on the invasion of Crimea, surmises that, "If on that occasion they had encountered fierce resistance, they would have been far more cautious in deciding how to act in the Donetsk Basin. When everything proved easy, the risks were not judged to be serious." That is something we will never know, but I certainly agree that the fervour of the "polite people" would have been considerably cooled if the Ukrainian military had proved willing to put up serious armed resistance. They did not. Could they have?

The use of firearms by military personnel is subject to military regulations. Article 6 of the Disciplinary Code of the Ukrainian Armed Forces states that use of weapons is permitted only in a combat situation; and in time of peace, only in exceptional cases and in accordance with the Regulations of the Garrison and Guard Services of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the Regulations of their Internal Service. The manner in which force and firearms can be used comes under Articles 195 to 199 and 202 of the former document, and the situations in which a Ukrainian soldier has the right to use firearms are defined in Articles 20, 21, 22 and 23 of the latter document.

In theory, Ukrainian soldiers had every right to shoot to kill at the first attempt to attack their military facilities. Article 22 of the Internal Service Regulations clearly states that a soldier has the right to use firearms individually or collectively as a member of a unit to "repel an attack on facilities he is defending" and "to recover these facilities in the event of their being captured"; also "in the event of an attempt to seize by force firearms or military equipment, if it is impossible to stop the attempt by other ways and means". But how do you react if your military unit is first cut off and then taken over piecemeal without the use of weapons, without shots being fired? Especially if this is taking place in what is officially peacetime. If the Ukrainian military facilities were fired on, the situation would have been straightforward: return fire on the orders of the commanding officer; but if everything is taking place without shooting, without bloodshed, the regulations offer little help. No commanding officer is going to take responsibility for giving the order to shoot to kill if his own soldiers are not being fired at and he himself has been given no clear orders to open fire. Everything depends on orders from above.

At the top of the pyramid of command is the supreme commander-in-chief, the president of Ukraine, but between 22 February and 7 June 2014 there was, in legal terms, no such person. Of course, from 23 February the acting president was Oleksandr Turchynov, and the military are required to carry out conscientiously and without demur the lawful orders of legitimate leaders of the state. But was that how they viewed Turchynov? All Ukraine's top generals

without exception questioned the legitimacy of his powers as supreme commander-in-chief, at least in the first days and weeks. There was deadlock. Yanukovich, who was arguably still the legitimate president, was on the run and people were beginning to face prosecution for carrying out his final orders. The new acting president had not yet got round to thinking about the Army and was trying to take over of the reins of government. In any case, no one would bet a bent kopyyka that heads would not soon be rolling for carrying out his orders too! As they say in the Army, don't be in a hurry to obey orders: they may be countermanded. Accordingly, the top military leaders who had not fled Kyiv along with Yanukovich were playing a waiting game.

At the level where the key decisions for commanding the Ukrainian Armed Forces needed to be taken there was chaos, if not total paralysis. Until 27 February the Ukrainian Minister of Defence was officially Pavel Lebedev, a Russian businessman and financier who had fled Kyiv on 21 February. He resurfaced in Sevastopol bearing a Russian passport, and was later elected to the Sevastopol Legislative Assembly. In other words, for a whole week, while the crisis was at its height, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence did nothing. On 27 February Admiral Ihor Tenyukh, former commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian Navy, was appointed acting minister of defence. It was too late: the Russian invasion of Crimea had been proceeding apace before the new minister took office, and continued while he was trying to find his feet in the ministry, get up to speed on his briefings, and take control. Things were not helped by the fact that, having served all his life in the Navy, Tenyukh had no experience of administering such a juggernaut as the Ministry of Defence, and had been away from military service since being sacked by Yanukovich in 2010.

On 3 March 2014 he issued an order authorizing Ukrainian sailors in Crimea to use weapons, but only in self-defence where attempts were being made to seize ships and only in accordance with the Regulations. A similar order was repeated after the murder in Simferopol of a warrant officer of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. What was needed was clear, unambiguous orders, not some casuistical reference to the Regulations. Nobody in Kyiv was prepared to give such an order. Speaking in the Ukrainian Parliament on 11 March, Admiral Tenyukh made the extraordinary statement that, "The Ukrainian Armed Forces have no legal right to instigate military action in Crimea," because, he explained, "there has de jure been no open aggression by Russia," and the Russian Federation had not officially accepted that it was mounting a military invasion! This meant, the Admiral explained, that in the given situation, "without the declaration of a military emergency, the use of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in Crimea would be a criminal act." Declaring a military emergency is the prerogative of the president and parliament, and with the minister of defence talking that way, what were commanding officers, soldiers and sailors supposed to do? Later Tenyukh, who stood down on 25 March 2014, even laid the blame on

commanders of ships and units: “In Crimea ships were seized, despite all commanders having been instructed to use firearms. They did not do so in order to prevent bloodshed.”

I had occasion at this time to talk to a naval officer I knew who was serving on a ship of the Ukrainian Navy. I quote him verbatim: “Of our command I can say only one thing: they abandoned and forgot us. There were no commands or orders other than calls to “Hold on!” and “Do not fall for provocations!” There were no clear and coherent orders. An order authorizing the use of firearms? There was no such order.”

The minister of defence was not, however, the key figure in this situation, because the functions of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence do not include commanding troops. It is a purely bureaucratic institution dealing with administrative and financial matters, human resources, procurement, construction and accommodation. The key person was the chief of the General Staff, the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Until 19 February 2014 the holder of this office was Colonel General Volodymyr Zamana, who was then replaced by Admiral Yuriy Ilyin, until then commander of the Ukrainian Navy. According to Ukrainian media, after his appointment Admiral Ilyin ordered the army to clear the protesters out of Independence Square (Maidan), but his subordinates ignored the order. After Yanukovich fled, the Admiral made it clear he did not regard the new government as legitimate. On 27 February 2014 he turned up in Sevastopol for negotiations, suffered a heart attack, and stayed there. In September 2014, the State Prosecutor’s Office instituted criminal proceedings against him for desertion. On 28 February Lieutenant General Mykhailo Kutsyn was appointed as the new chief of General Staff. In effect, from 19 - 28 February, the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces was dysfunctional: there was no chain of command to control the Armed Forces. To make matters worse, according to media reports none of the leaders of the General Staff made any attempt to contact the commanding officers of military units in Crimea.

Another key institution is the High Command of the Ukrainian Navy. It would be difficult to overstate its importance. The only Ukrainian units in Crimea which were in a position to offer resistance were Navy units. Until 19 February the commander of the Ukrainian Navy was Admiral Ilyin. It was only on 1 March that a replacement was found and Rear Admiral Denis Berezovsky took over. For 10 days, - and what days they were, - the Navy simply had no commander-in-chief. No later than the morning of 2 March, Rear Admiral Berezovsky gave orders to his subordinates to lay down their arms and not resist Russian troops. He then took the oath of allegiance “to the people of Crimea and Sevastopol”. He was dismissed from his post on the same day and charges were brought against him under Art. 111 (“Treason”) of the Ukrainian Criminal Code. He was replaced as commander of the Ukrainian Navy by Rear

Admiral Serhiy Hayduk, but on 19 March Hayduk was arrested at the headquarters of the Ukrainian Navy in Sevastopol by Russian FSB agents. The next day he was released, but the reputation of the General Staff of the Ukrainian Navy had been severely tarnished.

In Crimea there were also offices and units of troops of the Ukrainian Internal Affairs Ministry, but suffice it to say that even before 21 February, Internal Affairs Minister Vitaliy Zakharchenko fled Ukraine and a warrant was issued for his arrest. Another warrant was issued for the arrest of the commander of Ukraine's Internal Affairs Troops, Lieutenant General Stanislav Shulyak. Oleksandr Yakymenko, until 24 February 2014 head of the Ukrainian Security Service, is also wanted on a charge of treason.

### **Subversion**

The operation in east and southeast Ukraine, which began in spring 2014, stands somewhat apart. It was not initially a military special operation but a terrorist campaign of subversion. At first glance its purpose was to destabilize the whole of Ukraine. Subversive groups were touring around several Ukrainian provinces, raiding government buildings, police stations and Ukrainian Security Service offices and handing out purloined weapons to questionable local elements.

Closer inspection reveals that the activities of these groups were not random but carefully synchronized and carried out in accordance with an overall plan coordinated from a single centre. A first wave of attacks occurred synchronously on 6 April 2014. Under the cover of ranting crowds of demonstrators, armed masked men seized the building of the regional administration in Kharkiv and declared the province independent. At the same time and in the same manner, the buildings of the local government and Security Service in Donetsk were captured and the establishment of a "Donetsk People's Republic" proclaimed. Simultaneously in Luhansk, men in masks and armed with assault rifles occupied the municipal offices of the Ukrainian Security Service, taking hostages and claiming to have packed the building with explosives. The following day, 7 April, an attempt was made to capture the local government building in Mykolaiv.

The raids peaked on Saturday and Sunday, 12-13 April. On 12 April heavily armed groups with army equipment and wearing camouflage uniforms without insignia or marks of rank simultaneously attacked targets in several cities of the Donetsk Basin: Donetsk itself, Horlivka, Druzhkivka, Kramatorsk, Kostiantynivka, Sloviansk, Krasnyi Lyman, Artemivsk and Krasnoarmiysk. In Krasnyi Lyman the attack was repulsed. The assault on the municipal police station in Horlivka initially also failed, but it was captured on 14 April using a human shield of

protesters on whom the police chose not to shoot. In Sloviansk the city police headquarters was captured, as were the municipal administration building, and the headquarters of the Ukrainian Security Service; in Kramatorsk it was the police station; in Kostiantynivka the police headquarters; in Donetsk the chemical plant, the district Internal Affairs Ministry office. The Donetsk Berkut riot police defected to the side of the "insurgents"; in Krasnoarmiysk the district police headquarters was occupied.

On 13 April the city hall in Mariupol was captured, and the administration's buildings in Makiivka; in Yenakiieve the prosecution service, police and city council offices were seized; in Luhansk the police sided with the insurgents. In Odesa there was an attempt to seize the USS building and there were clashes in Kharkiv. The whole episode can be summarized in three words: synchronicity, unity, coordination. We need not go on, because it was the events of 12-13 April that were crucial. They caused the situation to explode, detonating a war in the Donetsk Basin. We can only agree with the comments of Igor Girkin ("Strelkov"): "The guy who pulled the trigger for this war was, let's face it, me. If our squad hadn't crossed the frontier, everything would have ended up like it did in Kharkov and Odessa. A few dozen people would have got killed, burnt, arrested and it would all have been over. The fact is, it was our squad got the whole war moving, and it isn't over yet."

In the early days of this subversive attack, many people were certain that those at work in the Donetsk Basin were the same "little green men" as had invaded Crimea: special forces saboteurs from the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. But what sort of nonsense would it be to squander GRU manpower on trivialities like seizing police stations in small towns? It would demean the special forces and be militarily pointless. The GRU do not have men to waste on that. Not to mention the fact that if one of the "real" special forces agents was taken prisoner (which can never be ruled out), in peacetime and on the territory of a foreign state, the political consequences would be unpredictable.

After watching video of the seizing by assault groups of the police headquarters in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, it is clear that these are not the Russian Army's special forces. At first sight they seem trained and disciplined. They know how to hold a rifle, and are plainly not doing so for the first time, but their approach to capturing a building is far from professional. The assault groups do not have the skills of real soldiers. This is particularly obvious when you compare these recordings with those of the capturing of facilities in Crimea.

A minor matter, perhaps, but it is very noticeable that although they run in a purposeful manner, they cluster too closely together: one round could take the whole group out. They are not

covering each other from the sides or the rear, as you would expect even ordinary soldiers to do. Those storming the police headquarters in Sloviansk spend an unbelievable amount of time pulling out a window grating, clumsily trying to drag it out with a cable attached to a UAZ jeep. Then these men in camouflage take ages, by military standards, battering in the window with rifle butts and, when they finally succeed, awkwardly clamber in through what is only a ground floor window. For special operations troops that would have been no problem.

The assault in Kramatorsk has a similar look: a coordinated assault, but this is a crowd, not a disciplined group. Is it just that they are supremely confident nobody is going to open fire on them? We can dismiss that: special operations troops always and everywhere work the way they have been trained. That is automatic. It all looks very reminiscent of ordinary police and riot police going into action against demonstrators. The groups are, nevertheless, undoubtedly being led by regular army officers with combat experience.

It later emerged that this was indeed the case: those leading the assault groups in this first sally were active professional soldiers, and the groups they were leading had been recruited from ex-police officers and soldiers who had retired into the reserves. This was convenient for their handlers: if there were losses, these were just cannon fodder and no one would have any explaining to do. They had undergone refresher training and preliminary combat coordination at camps and bases in Crimea and possibly the Rostov region. Although the training was quick and plainly rudimentary, it would not have been feasible to prepare so many groups at short notice. Does that mean this option too had been thoroughly thought through long ago? There does not seem to have been full-blown military training. Perhaps from the outset, these were throwaway militia groups designed to quickly solve a problem: capture a target and pass it over to someone else. The question then is, to whom?

Because special operations groups are unlikely to be operating in random locations, it was time to take a look at the map and check reference books on transport networks. Here it was immediately apparent that all the towns and villages attacked on 12-13 April 2014, although seemingly not particularly important, were in fact crucial transport hubs and junctions for rail and, more importantly, road communications. Kramatorsk has in addition an airport with a military grade runway. Sloviansk is part of a large conurbation which includes, apart from itself, Kramatorsk, Krasnyi Lyman and several other villages: the whole agglomeration adds up to a transport junction and major communications hub for rail and, particularly, road transport. Strategically important roads pass through Sloviansk. Controlling this transport hub of the northern sector of the Donetsk Basin, you would be in a position, on the one hand, to launch a campaign into the centre of the Donetsk Basin and, on the other, to mount an offensive along

the E40 highway on Izyum, with the prospect of high-speed access to Kharkiv. Holding the Sloviansk hub, you could cut off supplies to the Ukrainian Army in the northeast Donetsk region. Capturing these transport hubs, particularly Sloviansk, would make it far more difficult for the Ukrainian security forces to conduct their antiterrorist operation (ATO) from its base in Izyum.

There was, however, an even more significant factor: utilizing the towns and villages and the junctions attacked or captured on 12-13 April, Russian troops invading the Donetsk Basin at that time could have launched an offensive along the Rostov - Kharkiv Highway. For this, it would be hard to overestimate the importance of controlling Kramatorsk airport with its Class B military runway (minimum length, 2,600 metres). This is capable of accommodating all types of Russian military transporter aircraft. Exploiting it (the Donetsk and Luhansk airports were not then under insurgent control) an operation could rapidly airlift troops into the centre of the Donetsk Basin. This was evidently the original plan: to capture key locations facilitating the movement of troops along the Highway, and land troops in Kramatorsk. The logic of events suggests this could have been expected within a few days, around 15-17 April. Girkin-Strelkov, himself a former Russian FSB agent, openly admitted that after the capture of Sloviansk, “We all had every confidence that ... Russia would come to the rescue,” and that “I originally proceeded on the assumption that the Crimean scenario would be repeated and Russia would invade.”

He no doubt proceeded on that assumption not because of an overactive imagination, but because of orders received under the original plan. These, incidentally, he carried out, but the plan was evidently suddenly changed and, for some reason as yet unknown, Russian troops did not this time invade. A contributing factor may have been the successful defeat by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, using combat aircraft, of an attempt on 15 April to capture the Kramatorsk airfield. Having failed to capture the landing strip, and with the unexpected threat of Ukrainian air attacks, a landing of “peacekeeping” Russian troops had evidently to be cancelled. In addition, a column of Ukrainian troops entered Sloviansk that day, temporarily preventing use of the Highway.

On 16 April a determined attempt to take Mariupol failed when a military unit of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs successfully repulsed an attack by pro-Russian insurgents. A breakthrough of Russian “peacekeepers” to the Donetsk Basin, and also the establishing of a corridor to Crimea, which involved actual fighting, were evidently not part of the Kremlin's plan at the time. Accordingly, they switched from Plan A to Plan B, which they appear to have

worked out on the back of an envelope, and decided instead to make use of the groups they had earlier abandoned. Exactly how we have been seeing ever since.



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