
VIOLENCE FLARES IN WAR-WEARY UKRAINE AS US DITHERS AND RUSSIA POUNCES

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Since the war started in 2014 more than 300 shells have fallen on the grounds of the factory, the largest coking plant in Europe, which sits on Ukrainian-controlled territory just a few miles from the frontline with Russia-backed separatists. The big guns have been mercifully quiet for months, but the past fortnight has seen a new flurry of violence, linked in Kiev to a Russia apparently newly emboldened by the election of Donald Trump in the US.

More than 30 people are believed to have died in the latest wave of violence, including civilians on both sides of the lines, as heavy artillery banned by a two-year-old ceasefire has been wheeled back into place. Avdiivka was without electricity for several days during the latest fighting, the most intense for more than a year, according to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which monitors the conflict.

The coking plant was spared direct hits, but Elena Volkova, 36, who had worked at the factory for a decade, died when her apartment block was shelled. She was the 10th factory employee to die since the war started.

It would be nice if we could just come to work and not have to worry about the war, not have to always be ready to fling ourselves to the ground if there are particularly loud bangs, said Mikhail, a shift manager who has worked at the plant for more than two decades. Outgoing artillery fire could be heard as he spoke.

As always, there have been a flurry of competing claims over who started this round of fighting. In Kiev, officials said Russia-backed separatists had been preparing for an offensive for some time. In recent weeks weve had intelligence of at least 170 vehicles with munitions and at least 60 with fuel crossing from Russia. It was definitely prepared, the foreign minister, Pavlo Klimkin, said during an interview in Kiev last week.

The violence that began in the hours after Trump and the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, spoke by telephone was, according to Kostiatyn Yeliseiev, deputy head of the Ukrainian presidential administration, a test from the Russian side of the reaction of the new American administration and unity inside the European Union.

On the ground, however, things look more complicated. In recent weeks, Ukrainian forces have made creeping advances. In this latest flare-up, it appears the Russia-backed rebels were the first to fire heavy artillery. But one Ukrainian soldier based in the industrial zone — a stretch of front where the opposing lines are just half a mile apart — claimed the Ukrainians had provoked the rebel side into an aggressive response by seizing a small stretch of road. We knew exactly what to do, and it worked perfectly, he said. Its all our territory, after all.

During the Obama years, Kiev could count on steady support from Washington over the conflict in the east of the country, which Russia fuelled by funnelling fighters and weapons across the border. But with Trumps repeated focus on improving relations with Russia, there is a worry in Ukraine that the country could get thrown under the bus in the service of a grand deal with Putin.

We do hope that the Ukrainian issue will not be settled behind the back of Ukraine, said Yeliseiev. We hope that sooner or later there will be a more proactive position expressed by the new American administration.

Trump has brushed off all criticism of his warm words for Putin, and dismissed the effects of an apparent Russian campaign to help him get elected. Trump wrote on Twitter last month: Both countries will, perhaps, work together to solve some of the many great and pressing problems and issues of the WORLD!

With inconsistency in the new administrations messaging on Russia and Ukraine, even US diplomats are unsure of what position Trump will eventually take on the issue. Ukrainian authorities have been left rummaging in the tea leaves trying to discern just how much trouble they are in.

Meanwhile, Trumps national security adviser, Michael Flynn, has resigned after a torrent of intelligence leaks suggested he had secretly discussed sanctions with the Russian ambassador to Washington and then tried to cover up the conversations.

Trump himself, during an interview on Fox News, was asked about the uptick in violence coming just after his phone call with Putin, and gave a characteristically ambiguous, semi-coherent answer: We dont really know exactly what that is. Theyre pro forces. We dont know if theyre uncontrollable. Are they uncontrollable? That happens also. It was unclear whether he meant the forces were pro-Russian or professional.

Diplomats and analysts in Kiev say they believe Russias current goal is not to take more territory from Ukraine but to push the territories already seized back into Ukraine on terms advantageous to Moscow, giving them a long-term foothold in the country.

We need to get Russia out of Donbass: directly in terms of Russian troops, but also Russian mercenaries, weaponry and all kind of tricks and indirect influence, said Klimkin.

He will travel to the US this week, and the hope is that Ukraines president, Petro Poroshenko, may be able to secure a meeting with Trump later in the month. The two presidents spoke by telephone last week, though both sides have been cagey about releasing details of the call.

Poroshenko and Trump found kind of a human touch during their phone conversation, according to Yelisiiev, noting that both men were successful businessmen. Poroshenko is a billionaire who built a confectionary empire before he entered politics.

But adding to the Ukrainian presidents woes is former prime minister and now opposition leader, Yulia Tymoshenko, who managed to secure a personal meeting with Trump after the US national prayer breakfast earlier this month.

Ukrainian government advisers spun that Tymoshenko had cornered Trump on the way to the toilets. In fact, the meeting took place in a private room and had been set up the day before. The Ukrainian delegation were completely ashen faced when they found out that the meeting would happen, said a source who was present at the breakfast. Yelisiiev complained it was not too correct to allow just any kind of politician to shake hands with the US president.

Tymoshenko, a savvy political operator, has many admirers in the west but has also not been shy to cut deals with Moscow in the past. She has a burning ambition to become president, and officials in Kiev feel her interventions could further complicate what is already a daunting task of winning support from the Trump administration.

In Avdiivka, geopolitical concerns seem far away, but the return of the war that has turned peoples lives upside down for the past three years has been deeply unwelcome. Musa Magomedov, director of the coking plant, said it was time to find a political solution to the conflict.

Although he was born and grew up in Dagestan, a part of Russia, there is no doubt where his sympathies lie in the current conflict: I was offered good money to move to a Russian factory when the war started, but I turned it down. Im a citizen of Ukraine and I love Ukraine.

However, he had tough words for idiots in expensive suits sitting in Kiev who called for renewed military offensives in the region, believing instead that a political solution was required to halt the loss of life.

People like that should try sitting in a trench for themselves a bit. The people here want to work, they want to live normally, and they are tired of this endless stress and misery.

Kaynak/Source: