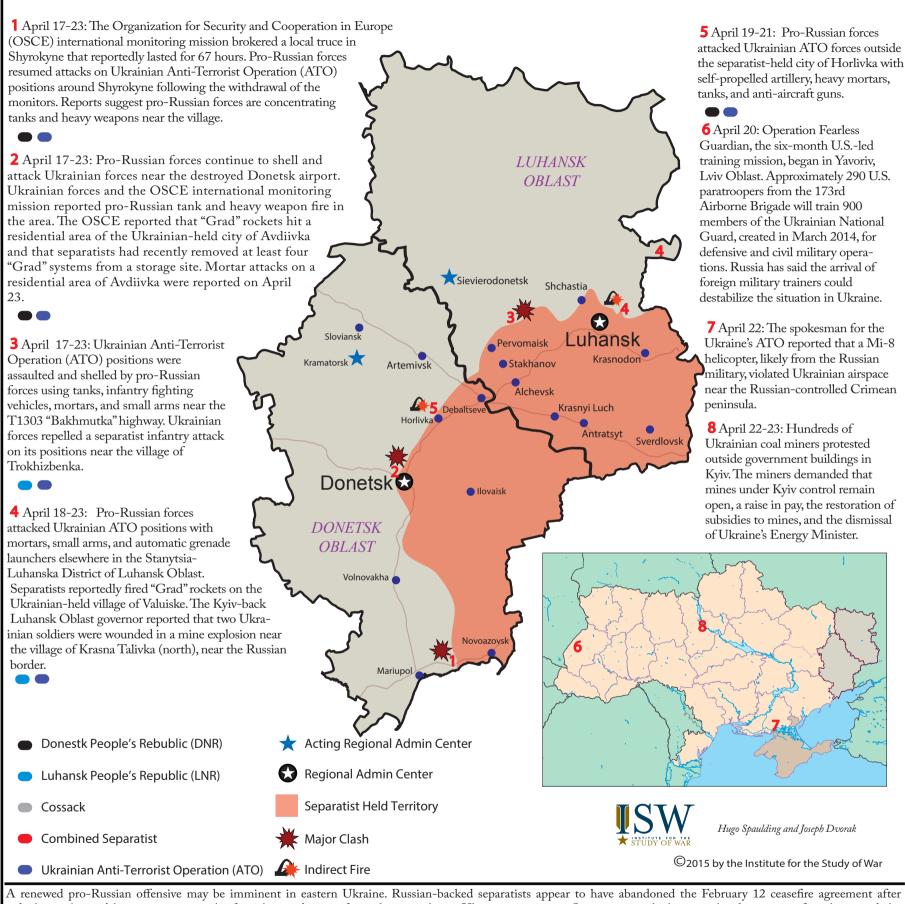
Ukraine Crisis Update: April 23, 2015



A renewed pro-Russian offensive may be imminent in eastern Ukraine. Russian-backed separatists appear to have abandoned the February 12 ceasefire agreement after redeploying banned heavy weapons to the front line and intensifying their attacks on Ukrainian positions. Separatist attacks have escalated most significantly around the destroyed Donetsk airport, the most advanced Ukrainian positions to the separatist stronghold of Donetsk, and Shyrokyne, the closest separatist position to the key Ukrainian port city of Mariupol. Both areas have seen indirect fire exchanges and skirmishes over the past two months but fighting escalated this week to a level not seen since the separatist victory at the rail hub of Debaltseve. Attacks by previously withdrawn "Grad" multiple launch rocket systems and other heavy weapon on Ukrainian-held populated areas also indicate the separatists' abandonment of the ceasefire agreement and possible efforts to clear civilians from the area in preparation for an offensive. Russian-backed separatists may be timing the launch of offensive operations to coincide with the start of the U.S. training mission in western Ukraine, which began this week, and Victory Day demonstrations on May 9. As in the January-February 2015 offensive which ruptured the first ceasefire agreement, pro-Russian forces would likely sequence two offensive maneuvers to capitalize on the element of surprise and seize key territory. The concentration of pro-Russian forces and attacks around the Donetsk airport and Shyrokyne suggest that the offensive maneuvers would target Ukrainian military positions and populated areas near these points of strategic significance. Russia increased its military support for the separatists this week, with a shipment of military vehicles and a 25th uninspected aid convoy. The U.S. State Department reported the highest number of Russian soldiers along the Ukrainian border and the largest presence of Russian air defense systems in Donbas since 2014.