

The
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Ukraine at war Fight club

After the war that was not a war, the ceasefire that is not a ceasefire

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WHAT can you say to the families of the many people killed during Ukraine's month-old "ceasefire"? At least 331 Ukrainian soldiers and civilians have died since September 5th, when the government and the rebels agreed to stop fighting. Among the dead were a Donetsk



we?

Let's stop shooting, shall

teacher caught in shelling and Laurent DuPasquier, a Swiss worker with the International Committee of the Red Cross. The true toll may be even higher.

The worst of the latest violence is centred around the Ukrainian-held airport in Donetsk, once a sleek symbol of progress, now a wasteland of rubble. Another hotspot is the town of Debaltseve, farther east on the road from Donetsk to Luhansk. These places are strategically important both for the rebels, who need supply routes, and for the government, loth to lose any more territory.

The so-called ceasefire was but one point of a 12-step peace plan hashed out in Minsk by Russia's Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's Petro Poroshenko. The broad contours seemed to satisfy all parties. But the devil is in the detail, and implementation has faltered. The Organisation for

Security and Co-operation in Europe lacks the manpower and armoured vehicles to monitor the entire region. Serhiy Taruta, the Kiev-appointed governor of Donetsk, says the Minsk accords are just too vague.



Prisoner swaps, another part of the peace plan, confirm this. The official agreement prescribes an “all for all” exchange, but the rebels have far more Ukrainian captives, and it is not clear just which prisoners are covered. “The mechanism was not worked out,” said Oksana Bilozir, a hostage negotiator for the Kiev government, as she supervised a 30-for-30 exchange in late September just north of Donetsk. More fundamentally, Mr Taruta writes, “the parties do not have a mutual vision of the future of the Donbas region.”

For the rebels, that future goes far beyond the Minsk plan, which enjoys little support inside their statelet, where it is seen as a diversion. Officials from the Donetsk People’s Republic,

announcing plans for local elections in early November, proposed polls in Sloviansk and Mariupol, former rebel strongholds now under Ukrainian control. Igor Plotnitsky, head of the Luhansk People's Republic and a signatory to the Minsk agreement, has told Russian media that "sooner or later, we will become a part of the Russian Federation." Schools in Luhansk have reportedly begun receiving Russian textbooks.

The rebels are using this period to get ready for further conflict. "We're preparing, repairing equipment, digging trenches, training and resting," says a senior rebel commander nicknamed "Dushman". Many of his men come from towns north of Donetsk that are under Ukrainian control. They still have property and belongings left behind during a hasty retreat in early July. Dushman's fighters will not abandon their homes for good. Ukrainian troops are also fortifying their lines. At checkpoints west of Donetsk, tanks and troop carriers can be found amid excavators and tractors.

Mr Poroshenko has staked his political life on peace, proclaiming that "the main and most dangerous part of the war is behind us." Mr Putin, beset by economic concerns, is willing to play along. But Ukraine's general election on October 26th offers a new opportunity for chaos. Another Russian-backed offensive in the east would damage Mr Poroshenko's credibility with voters and could swing support to nationalist parties, leading to a fractured parliament incapable of reform.

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