

## HIGHLIGHTS

# PULSE OF PEACE IN DONBAS



17–27 December, 2021

### TCG MANAGED TO AGREE ON CEASE-FIRE

On December 22, during a meeting of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG), an agreement was reached to return to the ceasefire regime in Donbas, Ambassador Mikko Kinnunen, special representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office in Ukraine and in the TCG, [said](#), adding that the decision was of particular importance because the security situation along the line of contact remains unstable, and this month the SMM has recorded an average of five times more ceasefire violations a day compared to the same period last year.

First Deputy Head of the Ukrainian delegation to the TCG Andrey Kostin [noted](#) that a real opportunity to ensure ceasefire on the line of contact in Donetsk and Luhansk regions has arisen for the first time in a long time, and it is important that the other side has also demonstrated its willingness to take this step.

Andrei Yermak, head of the presidential office, [called](#) this decision a step toward de-escalation in eastern Ukraine.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valeriy Zaluzhnyi [issued a joint statement](#), welcoming the agreement reached during the TCG meeting and noting that the Armed Forces of Ukraine would consistently and strictly adhere to the ceasefire.

No decisions have been made on the exchange of detainees either. At the same time, the so-called "L/DPR" are ready to exchange prisoners after Ukraine approves the roadmap for compliance with the Minsk agreements in the Verkhovna Rada, as [stated](#) by a representative of the so-called "LPR" who participated in a meeting of the

working subgroup on humanitarian issues of the TCG. However, [according to Serhiy Garmash](#), a member of the Ukrainian delegation to the TCG, the chances of an exchange taking place this year are extremely low.

The speaker of the Ukrainian delegation to the TCG, Oleksiy Arestovych, [expects](#) that the issue of the exchange of detainees in Donbas can be activated by the USA. He noted that Ukraine is ready for the exchange, but it is impossible to agree it within the framework of the TCG because the Russian side insists that Ukraine should negotiate with the so-called "L/DPR". At the same time, the USA de facto already takes an active part in the negotiations, including with Russia.

At the last TCG meeting in 2021, it was not possible to reach an agreement on the opening of all checkpoints. [According to Oleksiy Arestovich](#), in order to open checkpoints in eastern Ukraine, the Russian side requires Ukraine to recognize the Russian vaccine "Sputnik V" that has not received WHO approval and the relevant vaccination certificates.

It also became [known](#) about the completion of the inspection visit of the IAEA mission to the non-government-controlled parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which had been previously agreed within the framework of the TCG.

## SITUATION ON UKRAINE'S BORDERS REMAINS TENSE, AND RUSSIA RESORTS TO DISINFORMATION

There are no significant changes in the positions of the Russian armed forces located near the Ukrainian border, the US [says](#). [According to calculations of the Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine](#), Alexei Danilov, as of December 22, there were 122 thousand Russian military personnel at a distance of 200 kilometers, and 143.5 thousand at a distance of 400 kilometers from the borders of Ukraine.

Recruiters in Russia have begun [recruiting](#) groups of mercenaries for "military missions to the Donbas", but it is not known exactly what tasks the mercenaries will be assigned.

[According to The New York Times](#), citing U.S. administration officials, the U.S. plans to provide Ukraine with real-time intelligence, including images of Russian troop movements, to help Ukraine respond faster to a possible Russian invasion, but the final version of the assistance plan has not yet been finalized.

As Michael McFaul, former U.S. ambassador to Moscow, [points out](#), Russia seeks to impose a division of Europe into spheres of influence on the United States, a proposal that is unacceptable. In his article, he calls for counter demands on Russia to bring many countries, including Russia's neighbors where conflicts have occurred, into the negotiations. At the same time, some experts [fear](#) that Russia is making obviously impossible demands in order to create a pretext for possible military action.

The BBC [offers](#) its own analysis of the situation.

German and U.S. assessments of the threat of a Russian invasion differ, [Reuters reported](#), citing two anonymous sources in the German government. Official Berlin

has more doubts about the likelihood of a military scenario and seeks to de-escalate existing tensions by quickly reactivating the Normandy format.

On December 18, the Russian Foreign Ministry [stated](#) that Russia will go into a mode of creating counter-strategies, including the use of "military-technical alternatives" if NATO does not accept proposals on security guarantees. One of the tools Russia continues to use is disinformation: Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reported that employees of private US military companies allegedly brought chemical weapons to cities in the Donetsk region to prepare a provocation.

One of the tools Russia continues to use is disinformation: Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu [reported](#) that employees of private US military companies allegedly brought chemical weapons to cities in the Donetsk region to prepare a provocation. The commentary of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry [stresses](#) that such assumptions are groundless and urges the Russian leadership to stop using the language of ultimatums, to return to a constructive track and resolve the conflict using political and diplomatic methods. The [Pentagon](#) and the [US Department of State](#) denied the words of the Russian Defense Minister, adding that Russia was responsible for the escalation of the situation.

Donbas.Realii [offers](#) an analysis of the situation and expert comments.

## UKRAINE PROPOSES COMPREHENSIVE INITIATIVE TO RESOLVE SITUATION IN DONBAS

Ukraine proposed to the United States, France, Germany and Russia a comprehensive initiative, ten steps to resolve the situation on the territory of the temporarily uncontrolled parts of Donbas, the implementation of which will be able to unblock the peace process – it was [stated](#) on December 21 at the conference of ambassadors "Diplomacy 30. A Strategy for a Strong State," said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. He did not provide details about the content of the initiative, but later its alleged [text](#) was published by the Russian newspaper Kommersant, which reported that among other things, it was planned to hold telephone and then face-to-face talks between the presidents of Ukraine and Russia, as well as to coordinate within the TCG a number of draft laws, including on the features of local self-government in the "L/DPR", on decentralization and on the features of local elections in the "L/DPR".

A representative of the Ukrainian delegation to the TCG, Sergey Garmash, [noted](#) that this document was informal and was not an official proposal to resolve the conflict, but a diplomatic expression of intent to continue the dialogue. On December 21, the head of the Ukrainian presidential office, Andriy Yermak, [noted](#) that the US leadership had decided for itself to get involved in the settlement process in eastern Ukraine, noting that this would complement the Normandy format, but would not replace it. Similar talks are also underway with Great Britain and Turkey.

## PROSECUTORS REQUEST LIFE SENTENCE FOR DEFENDANTS IN MH17 CRASH CASE

In the Netherlands, the prosecution began to speak on the merits of the trial in the case of the Boeing crash, which was shot down in the sky over the Donetsk region on July 17, 2014. Evidence of the guilt of the defendants [was presented](#). The prosecutor claims that the defendants, Russian citizens Girkin, Dubinsky, Pulatov and Ukrainian citizen Kharchenko "did not push the button themselves, but requested, received and used the Buk for their own military purposes and in doing so shot down MH17".

The Dutch prosecutor's office has [requested](#) a life sentence for the defendants. They are suspected of the very intent to shoot down the plane, with the death of 298 people as an aggravating circumstance. As the prosecution notes, no punishment can be fair enough. According to the prosecution, all four defendants "jointly led the plan to destroy the plane. It is separately noted that Russia played a "key role in the beginning and continuation of the war in eastern Ukraine" by supporting irregular military formations and providing them with weapons.

The court sessions were broadcast by the Graty court journalism [project](#).

The next court session should take place in March 2022. In it the defense representative of one of the defendants, Oleg Pulatov, will take the floor; the others refused to interact with the court. According to the tentative plan, several more meetings will be required to give the prosecution, the lawyers of the relatives and the defense an opportunity to respond to each other's statements. That will conclude the proceedings in the case.

The trial is expected to be over by January 2023.

## TEXT OF VERDICT OF RUSSIAN COURT CONTAINS EVIDENCE OF PRESENCE OF RUSSIAN MILITARY IN DONBAS

The Kirovsky District Court of Rostov-on-Don (Russia) handed down a [verdict](#) in the case of corruption in food supplies, which indirectly confirms the presence of the Russian military in Donbas. From its text, it follows that the defendant in the case demanded a monthly bribe for unimpeded food supplies to Russian soldiers on "combat duty" in eastern Ukraine. According to the defendant, food was delivered every two weeks; according to [various estimates](#), one such delivery was sufficient to feed about 25,000 people.

At the same time, the court's later [proposed](#) commentary emphasizes that the defendant's testimony was quoted in the verdict; in this part it was not verified by the court, because it was not a subject of the trial.

Russian presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov [called](#) the information in the Russian court materials about the supply of food to the Russian army in Donbas a mistake, saying that the armed forces of the Russian Federation were not and are not there.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry [believes](#) that this case will strengthen Ukraine's position in international courts, since Russia has created a legal precedent, fixing its status as a party to an international armed conflict.

The experts interviewed by the BBC [note](#) that the court in criminal proceedings is responsible for assessing the reliability of only what is the subject of proof of a crime, not the facts of political significance, so it would be incorrect to claim that the court confirmed the presence of Russian military personnel in Donbas.

## VLADIMIR PUTIN'S PRESS CONFERENCE: NO GUARANTEES OF NON-AGGRESSION

On December 23, Russian President Vladimir Putin held his annual [press conference](#), one of the main topics of which was the situation in Ukraine and the disagreement between official Moscow and Western countries over the concentration of Russian troops on the borders. According to the Russian president, the West should provide security guarantees to Moscow, rather than demand them from Moscow. Radio Svoboda [offers](#) an analysis of the press conference. Vladimir Putin also suggested that Ukraine was preparing a "military operation" in Donbas and refused to give guarantees of non-aggression against Ukraine, saying that Russia's actions would depend not on the course of negotiations, but on an unconditional guarantee of its security.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry [denied](#) the statement about preparations for a military operation in Donbas, noting that Ukraine seeks only peace and urged Russia to concentrate on the implementation of the cease-fire agreements and the resolution of the international armed conflict in eastern Ukraine.