

Global Hot Topics

Ukraine: violence intensified once again in 2017

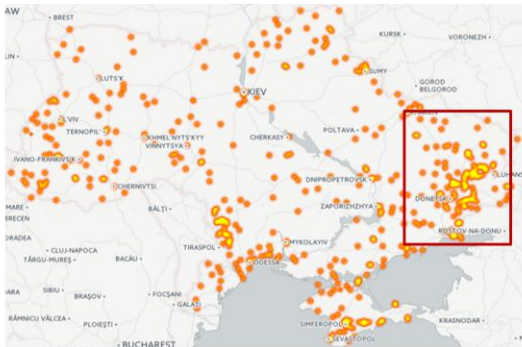
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Fighting in Eastern Ukraine erupted again, just a day after that the first phone call between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin since the US president's inauguration. It was the worst escalation since early 2015, leaving several dead and tens of thousands of people without water and heating in Avdiivka. The new US administration's policy stance towards the conflict is still undefined and increases concerns and uncertainties about the conflict evolution and the Russian role on it. The geopolitics could complicate and more outbreaks of violence could occur in the coming weeks.

Violence intensified in Donbas to its worst level since 2015

BBVA Research Ukraine Conflict Intensity Map 2016-17

(Cumulative number of conflicts)
Source: www.gdelt.org and BBVA Research



After several months of relative calm, intense clashes break out once again between the rebel forces and the Ukrainian army around the frontline. Right after Putin's congratulatory call to Trump as the new US president, where they discussed about cooperation in the war against terror and about restoring mutually beneficial trade and economic ties, fighting began between separatist forces and the Ukrainian army around the government-held town of Avdiivka and Donetsk. Heavy shelling by rebel forces destroyed the city of Avdiivka's water and heating infrastructure, leaving several dead and tens of thousands of people without water and heating for a week at below freezing temperatures.

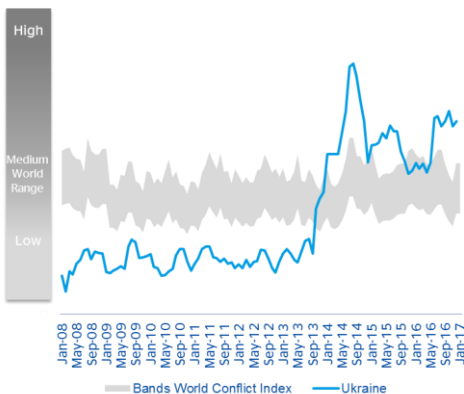
Separatist forces and the Ukrainian army each blamed the other of provoking the increase of hostilities. The reasons of the escalation are really unclear and there are multiple interests in play:

- During last weeks, the Ukrainian army advanced into the so called "grey zone" along the border. When they reached Avdiivka, Donetsk rebels realized they could lose control of the nearby strategic area and responded with firepower.
- It could be seen as a Russian attempt to step up military pressure on Ukraine and challenge the West to act.
- The fact that the conflict flared up just after Putin's conversation with Trump is not a coincidence. The new US administration's policy on Ukraine is still unclear and both countries could try to engage Trump's attention. Trump seems ready to lift Russian sanctions and Moscow could wish to demonstrate that Russia is best placed to manage the conflict, pursuing alternate negotiation format, which would include ending the sanctions regime. On the other hand, Ukraine could have incited the violence to draw attention to the conflict and to persuade the US to stand firm on sanctions.

The conflict resolution increasingly depends on US policy towards the conflict

BBVA Research Ukraine Conflict Intensity Index 2008-17

(Cumulative number of conflicts)
Source: www.gdelt.org and BBVA Research



Both sides seem to be waiting for policy clarity from US to the conflict. Trump's administration has delivered diverging messages on the Russian role in Ukraine. On the one hand, the US president Mr. Trump has suggested that he may consider revising the sanctions based on Russia's cooperation in other areas, such as an agreement on nuclear arms reduction. On the other hand, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, condemned Russian actions in the Ukraine conflict and insisted that Moscow must return Crimea.

The range of views expressed on the issue reflects a lack of clarity about US policy towards Ukraine, which prompts the escalation of violence during last weeks and complicates the geopolitical landscape on the issue. Russia will try to take advantage of the situation to manage the resolution of the conflict on his own terms, while Ukraine will try to look to its European allies for greater support. Meanwhile, the frontline in eastern Ukraine is on the brink of more outbreaks of fighting.

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