



Nikolaus von Twickel

Current events in the “People’s Republics” of eastern Ukraine

Interim Report 2018

Civic monitoring of certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk Region



Imprint

DRA e.V.
Badstraße 44
D-13357 Berlin

Tel. +49 (0)30 446 680 12
Fax. +49 (0)30 446 680 10
info@austausch.org
www.austausch.org
www.civicmonitoring.org

Project: Human Rights Monitoring in Eastern Ukraine



Implemented with support from the Federal Foreign Office of Germany



Author of the report: Nikolaus von Twickel

Editor: Tim Bohse

Photos: Title page: "Industrial city Donetsk" (2013) by Vladimir Yaitskiy, used under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic licence, desaturated from original.

All opinions included in this report do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Federal Foreign Office of Germany.

Copyright © DRA 2018

Reproduction of the content is authorized provided the source is acknowledged.

Content

Politics	4
Security	6
Economy	7
Human rights and civil society	8
Prospects	9
Short chronology	10
Endnotes	11

Preface

2018 saw major political tensions in separatist-controlled Donetsk, culminating in the assassination of local leader Alexander Zakharchenko on August 31. Power in the Donetsk “People’s Republic” (“DNR”) subsequently shifted to Denis Pushilin, the longtime Minsk negotiator, who has a reputation of being highly manageable and of having the Kremlin’s trust.

The political strife before Zakharchenko’s assassination, the purge of his allies afterwards and the lack of public debate about who is guilty strongly suggest that the longtime separatist leader’s killing was either ordered or tolerated by Moscow. Under Pushilin, Russia undoubtedly increased its political, military and economic control over the “DNR”, bringing it to levels seen in the neighbouring Luhansk “People’s Republic” (“LNR”).

The fact that Pushilin is a more flexible and civilian personality than the warlord-like Zakharchenko does not make a solution easier. The same can be said about the Luhansk “People’s Republic” (“LNR”) under the leadership of the intelligence officer Leonid Pasechnik.

However, questions abound about both “People’s Republics’” internal stability. The fact that its leaders both consolidated power only after purging their predecessors’ supporters and that no credible competitors are expected to challenge them in the November 11 “elections” does not speak of high internal consolidation.

Overall, the fundamentals governing the conflict remain unchanged. There are strong indications that Moscow’s goal is to maintain hotbeds of instability and deeply anti-western Trojan Horses in Ukraine’s flank. Under these circumstances, the best Ukraine can do is project good governance and prosperity into the areas it does not control and hope that the growing economic burden and/or ungovernability will make Russia rethink its support for the “People’s Republics”.

The report covers events in the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” over the period from January until October 2018. It is part of the project „Human Rights Monitoring in Eastern Ukraine“ of DRA e.V. Berlin and it is based on background interviews and the analysis of open internet sources.

Nikolaus von Twickel is a Berlin-based freelance journalist and expert focusing on post-soviet countries. Between 2007 and 2014 he worked in Moscow, first as a reporter for the Moscow Times, then as the correspondent for dpa International, the English-language service of Deutsche Presse-Agentur. Between October 2015 and March 2016 he served as a media liaison officer (Media Focal Point) for the OSCE Monitoring Mission in Donetsk. Since 2016 he publishes newsletters on political events in the “People’s Republics” on civicmonitoring.org.

POLITICS

Who killed Zakharchenko?

The killing of Alexander Zakharchenko was the most high-profile murder to occur in the separatist-held areas, but by far not the first. As after previous assassinations of lesser field commanders, the separatists blamed Ukraine and Western intelligence services. However, many observers agree that Moscow had strong reasons of getting rid of Zakharchenko, who had grown increasingly recalcitrant and had limited the Kremlin's control of the wealthier separatist "Republic".

Zakharchenko was killed by a presumably remote-controlled bomb just after entering a café that was close to his office in central Donetsk. Reports on social media, that have been neither denied nor confirmed, said that the café "Separ" was owned by Alexander Kostenko. He is a former Zakharchenko bodyguard who headed the ruling "Donetsk Republic" faction in "Parliament".

According to Russian TV footage, the explosive device was hidden in the ceiling just past the entry inside the café.¹ Thus, the assassins should have had direct access to the café, which was known to be frequented by Zakharchenko and his entourage. Kostenko, who in May received a medal from Zakharchenko for bravery, on September 4 denied rumours that he had fled Donetsk, saying that he was giving evidence and that there are suspects.² However, on September 13 Kostenko resigned from his job as faction leader without further explanation.³

While the separatist leadership was transferred to Dmitry Trapeznikov hours after the assassination, the deputy Premier turned out to be a mere placeholder for Pushilin – probably to smoothen the transition and to avoid suspicion in the immediate aftermath. Three days after Zakharchenko's funeral, on September 5, the Kremlin, speaking through political analyst Alexei Chesnakov, openly questioned Trapeznikov's legitimacy and endorsed Pushilin as "DNR" leader. On September 7, the separatist "people's council" duly elected Pushilin and Trapeznikov accepted defeat.

The great Pushilin purge

The purge of Zakharchenko's allies from power began on the same day. The first and most prominent victim, deputy Premier and "Revenue Minister" Alexander Timofeyev had already fled to Moscow and was reportedly barred from returning to Donetsk. Also sacked were the "Ministers" of Justice, Transport, Agriculture Industry and Defence,

with the latter "Ministry" apparently being completely disbanded (see Newsletter 42).⁴

While few people had expected Zakharchenko's assassination, his death ended months of speculation that the Donetsk separatist leader would be replaced. Rumours began in May, after Russian media reports suggested that Vladislav Surkov, the influential Kremlin aide who oversees eastern Ukraine, won't be serving in President Vladimir Putin's new administration.

In early June, Zakharchenko failed to appear in public for a whole week, while fuel and cash shortages created long lines outside petrol stations and banks. On June 5 he broke the silence and said that the fuel crisis was Russia's fault and would soon be resolved, but one day later a Crimean news site reported that Zakharchenko would be replaced by Pushilin (see Newsletter 32).⁵

Surkov was finally reappointed on June 13 – three months after Putin's re-election - but the situation did not calm down. Instead, reports of new arrests surfaced. Among the victims were the head of the "Republican Fuel Company" Igor Badusev and Transport "Minister" Igor Andrienko. Both institutions were rumoured to be riddled with corruption and it is not clear if these arrests were intended to end this or only to redirect illicit money flows.

More signs that political and economic competitors inside the "People's Republic" were settling scores came in July, when official media covered a tense standoff over a farm between armed men from Timofeyev's "Revenue Ministry" and a separatist MP. The conflict between Valery Skorokhodov, the purported farm owner and member of the „People's Council" for the ruling "Donetsk Republic" movement and Timofeyev can also be interpreted as one between „People's Council" chairman Pushilin, who was "Donetsk Republic" executive officer until November, and Zakharchenko (see Newsletter 35).⁶

Ruthless Revenue Ministry

Timofeyev, also known by his nickname "Tashkent", was believed to be Zakharchenko's closest and most powerful ally. His "Revenue Ministry", which is responsible for raising money for the government, while the Finance Ministry oversees the spending, became especially assertive after the separatists brought practically all industrial enterprises under their control following the trade blockade with Ukraine in early 2017.

Timofeyev's "Ministry" also commanded an armed formation of its own, whose members became infamous for showing up at factories and demand their share – or the whole company. Hours before he was sacked on

September 7, the official news website “Donestskoe Agentstvo Novostei” (DAN) published two reports which accused Timofeyev of ordering the expropriation of farming equipment worth 850 million roubles (11 million euros) and the seizure more than 100 buses and ten bus stations.⁷

These instances may just be the tip of the iceberg. An article in the Moscow-based online journal *Russky Reporter* said that Timofeyev was blamed by the Kremlin for numerous cases of smuggling and the misuse of state funds. The report also said that by unnecessarily hiking transport costs for coal and metals to Russia, he significantly diminished profits for Vneshtorgservis - the secretive holding company that took control of some of the largest plants in the People’s Republics” after the separatists seized all Ukrainian-owned industry in 2017.⁸

Moscow takes control of economy via Vneshtorgservis

Vneshtorgservis, which has no website and public records, has been linked to Serhy Kurchenko, a former Ukrainian Oligarch living in Russia, who has long been rumoured to control businesses in the “People’s Republics”. The company CEO is apparently Vladimir Pashkov, a Russian citizen and a former deputy governor of the Siberian Irkutsk region.

Vneshtorgservis is believed to be registered in South Ossetia. The small Georgian breakaway region has been recognized as independent by Russia and is the only territory that has recognized both “DNR” and LNR” as independent – making it a key hub for trade and payments between Russia and the “People’s Republics” without risking international sanctions or having to recognize them, which would violate the Minsk agreement (see Newsletter 22).⁹

However, Vneshtorgservis was only given nine of the 43 plants that were seized in the “DNR” in March 2017. The remaining 34 were administered by the separatists themselves, who divided them between eleven “ministries”, including the Revenue and Industry “Ministries” (six each) and the Energy and Coal “Ministry” (ten plants).

An investigation by Radio Svoboda, published on September 16, cited an unnamed source in the separatist leadership as saying that the previously “DNR”-administered plants will be transferred to Vneshtorgservis.¹⁰ In another sign of the company’s rising fortune, Pushilin’s new deputy Prime Minister Alexei

Ananchenko is believed to be a former adviser to the CEO of Vneshtorgservis.¹¹

If true, this would end the relative economic independence enjoyed by the “DNR” under Zakharchenko.

Military integration

Not only did the Donetsk separatists control more industrial assets, they also had more military independence vis-à-vis Moscow. Apart from his bodyguards, Zakharchenko had at least two formations under his command, the “Republican Guards” and a Special Forces (Spetsnaz) Regiment.

According to Russian media reports, all hitherto independent “DNR” formations were forcefully integrated either into the Russian-controlled “Operations Command DNR”, also known as the “First Army Corps”, or the Interior and State Security “Ministries”. At least one battalion commander and his deputy were reportedly detained after they resisted – and the “DNR” Defence “Ministry”, which apparently never commanded significant troops, was disbanded, according to separatist fighter turned blogger Alexander Zhuchkovsky.¹²

When their Armed Forces are renamed “People’s Militia”, the “DNR” military would closely resemble that of the “LNR”, which also has no Defence Ministry, just a “People’s Militia” led by an “Operations Command LNR” (also known as the “Second Army Corps”), in which, again, Russian officers are said to be in charge.

Questions about Pushilin’s popularity

There is little doubt that Moscow had strong motives to remove Zakharchenko and especially Timofeyev from office. But killing Zakharchenko and handing over power to Pushilin is a risky operation: Zakharchenko commanded a considerable number of loyal troops and was also thought to be a popular wartime leader. Pushilin, by contrast, has never been seen in uniform and until 2014 worked full-time for the “MMM” Ponzi scheme of convicted Russian fraudster Sergei Mavrodi.

However, the near-complete lack of free media and free speech together with a formidable security apparatus in the “People’s Republics” can make such an operation viable. Following Zakharchenko’s killing, Donetsk and Luhansk began preparing leadership and parliamentary elections for November 11 – four years after the first elections in 2014. Both Pushilin and Pasechnik declared their candidacy and were duly backed by fawning coverage in official separatist media outlets.

Both will face little competition. In Luhansk, Pasechnik is standing against three little-known candidates. In Donetsk, the two most prominent opposition figures were barred from participation. On September 20, Russian border guards prevented former separatist commander and blogger Alexander Khodakovsky from entering the "People's Republic". On October 18, Pavel Gubarev, who led the pro-Russian protests in Donetsk in 2014, was denied registration on the grounds that many of his supporters' signatures were fake.¹³

Elections a Minsk violation?

Ukraine and the West oppose elections in the "People's Republics" as a violation of the Minsk agreement, which does not speak of such republics at all and stipulates that local elections shall be held in the separatist-held areas under Ukrainian law.

In a sign that Russia was seeking a compromise, during August separatist media in both Donetsk and Luhansk campaigned for postponing the vote – despite the fact, that Zakharchenko and Pasechnik had been busy promoting five-year election programmes this spring.

Moscow spin doctor Chesnakov first said that suspending the elections was conditional on Ukraine prolonging the "Special Status Law" that sets rules for reintegrating the separatist-held areas according to the Minsk agreement. He later claimed that the motive was "not to irritate Angela Merkel" (see Newsletter 42).¹⁴

However, after Zakharchenko's murder, Moscow said that elections were necessary to avoid a power vacuum. Boris Gryzlov, the Kremlin's chief Minsk negotiator, argued that the "People's Republics" leadership and parliamentary elections do not fall under the Minsk agreement because that only speaks of municipal elections.¹⁵

What about Luhansk?

At first sight, the turmoil in Donetsk did not directly affect the neighbouring Luhansk "People's Republic". The smaller separatist statelet has been relatively stable since its leadership was exchanged in a bloodless coup in 2017, when Leonid Pasechnik replaced longtime separatist leader Igor Plotnitsky.

However, Pasechnik is by no means a neutral figure in the recent disputes with Moscow. A career intelligence officer, he was widely believed to be backed by Russia's security services before and during the 2017 putsch, while Plotnitsky was thought to be the Kremlin's – or Vladislav Surkov's - candidate.

Russian journalist Pavel Kanygin has suggested that the intervention by "DNR" forces in Luhansk, who gave crucial support for Pasechnik, happened without the Kremlin's approval.¹⁶ The unmarked troops were thought to have been from Zakharchenko's "Republican Guard".

However, there have been no signs of dissonances between Moscow and Luhansk in recent months. In fact, the "LNR" seemed to follow the Kremlin's tune more closely – e.g. in August its official media pushed forcefully for cancelling the November elections, while the Donetsk media seemingly tried to sidestep the issue (see Newsletter 40).¹⁷

Security

The security situation in Donbass changed very little this year. While both sides continued to respect the 500 kilometre -"Contact Line" that divides government and separatist troops since the February 2015 Minsk Agreement, Ukrainian government troops continued their advance into pockets left in the so-called grey zone between frontline positions.

In May, government forces entered Chyhari, a tiny settlement in the Donetsk region, located between Pivdenne (Yuzhnoe in Russian) and the western outskirts of separatist-controlled Horlivka. In the Luhansk region, two similar advances occurred in the area of Zolote: In early February, government troops moved into the village of Katerynivka, and in late June they entered Zolote-4, also known as Rodina.¹⁸

While advances towards the Contact Line without crossing it may be motivated by the desire to improve soldiers' morale, which is being rattled by the ongoing stalemate, they increase the risk of escalation as the hostile troops move closer to each other.

The tactic also diametrically contradicts the disengagement agreement of 2016, in which the sides agreed to withdraw their forces two kilometres each from the Contact Line. No progress has been made this year at implementing this agreement, even though it has so far been limited to three test areas.¹⁹

The fact that the separatists did not respond in kind may indicate that they lack the troops to do so, pointing to a growing imbalance on the battlefield. However, both sides' moves are governed overall by strategic considerations: Ukraine is restrained by the possibility of a large-scale military incursion from the Russian Federation,

while Russia is restrained by the threat of harsher sanctions from the West.

Most peaceful summer since 2013

On a positive note, “seasonal” ceasefires agreed at the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group talks, were holding better than in previous years. After a worrying escalation in May and June, the Group arranged a harvest ceasefire beginning July 1 and a subsequent ceasefire for the beginning of the school year.

As a result, the number of civilian casualties went down. The Monitoring Mission of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) recorded 34 civilian deaths between 1 January and 17 September.²⁰ This compares favorably with 2016 and 2017, when the overall death toll stood at 83 and 85 respectively by mid-December.

Austrian diplomat Martin Sajdik, who chairs the talks in the Belarusian capital for the OSCE, said on September 5, that “this summer has turned out to be the most peaceful since the beginning of the conflict.”²¹

Notably, the assassination of “DNR” leader Zakharchenko did not trigger a significant escalation. This contrasts with November 2017, when government troops moved into two grey zone villages in the Svitlodarsk area (Hladosove and Travneve), just as the putsch between rival separatist factions was underway in neighbouring Luhansk.

Sea of Azov

However, a new threat to the precarious security situation appeared during the summer in the Sea of Azov. Since June, Russia has been delaying ships en route to the government-controlled city of Mariupol by tightening controls at the Kerch Strait, the only passage to the Sea of Azov.

The Russian policy, which was introduced after the bridge linking annexed Crimea with the Russian mainland was opened in May, has been described as a provocation by Ukraine. As a consequence, the income of the ports of Mariupol and Berdiansk was reduced by a third, mainly because of the reduction in metals exports, according to official data released in September.

Economy

The separatists’ efforts to revive the local economy with help from Russia and without ties to Ukraine showed few signs of success. As in 2017, the task to run a coal and steel industry cut off from its original market in Ukraine and with little or no official ties to its eastern neighbor Russia proved daunting.

In August, “DNR” leader Alexander Zakharchenko celebrated the assembly of a single tram as a sign for the return of industrial production. However, Ukrainian media quickly pointed out that the vehicle was copied from a Russian factory, whose production in turn is based on old Czechoslovak models. Similar doubts were raised about the first “DNR” refrigerators and busses.

In neighbouring Horlivka, the separatists admitted that attempts to reopen the “Stirol” chemical plant are complicated by a lack of qualified staff. “DNR” Industry “Minister” Alexei Granovsky said in July that all the plant’s main specialists had left the “Republic” since 2014 (see Newsletter 39).²² In August, Granovsky’s “Ministry” claimed that Stirol would return to full capacity in September.²³ However, Granovsky was sacked on September 7 and it is unclear how his successor, Sergei Ilin, will carry out the plan.

The seriousness of the brain-drain plaguing the “People’s Republics” was highlighted by reports that the separatists were barring key professionals from leaving the areas under their control. A Radio Svoboda report in May said that this even some coalminers are being forced to sign agreements in which they declare to take unpaid leave and won’t be travelling to government-controlled Ukraine. No reason was given for this policy, but experts quoted for the article suggested that the separatists wanted to make the miners to join their armed formations.²⁴

The mining industry, a key sector in the local economy, has suffered greatly from a lack of sales markets since the imposition of a mutual trade blockade with the rest of Ukraine in March 2017. The result was a drastic drop of coal production. In the Donetsk “People’s Republic” alone the figure halved from more than 12 million tons in 2016 to about 6 million in 2017.²⁵

The “DNR” has said that it will increase production this year to 8.2 million tons, but this might be challenging to sell, because it presumably exceeds domestic demand. Much of the coal production is thought to be shipped to Russia and from there back to Ukraine, thus circumventing the trade blockade: According to Ukraine’s Fiscal Service, coal imports rose by 42.9 percent to 9.246 million tons in

the first five months of 2018 compared to the same period last year. About two thirds of this was supplied by Russia.²⁶

The lack of raw materials and sales markets is also troubling the metals sector. In April the separatists boasted to have reopened the “Silur” cable factory in Khartsyzk, which they said would work at prewar capacity of up to 3,000 tons per month using steel from the Yuzovsky Metallurgy Plant in neighbouring Donetsk. However, when newly minted interim leader Pushilin visited in September, he was told that the plant lacked raw material for production.²⁷

Overall, the economic situation in the separatist-held areas does not compare favorably with that in government-controlled parts of eastern Ukraine. In the “DNR” an average monthly salary was about 10,000 roubles, or 130 euros, this spring, while it was 8,927 hrywna (287 euros) in government-controlled Donetsk Region. Figures for the Luhansk region are even lower: According to separatist leader Leonid Pasechnik, an average teacher’s salary in the “LNR” was just 5,000 roubles, or 65 euros, this spring (see Newsletter 29).²⁸

Human rights and civil society

The human rights situation inside the “People’s Republics” showed no signs of improvement. The separatists in both Luhansk and Donetsk continued their policies of publishing video “confessions” of captured soldiers and detained civilians. They also targeted journalists, while access for foreign journalists remains severely restricted. Continued efforts by the Minsk negotiators to arrange another prisoner exchange brought no results.

Known by the Russian acronym MGB, the separatist Security “Ministries” habitually parade purported Ukrainian spies on camera. In March, the Donetsk MGB published a bizarre video confession of a man who admitted to have worked for Ukraine’s SBU intelligence agency by spreading “destabilizing information” on Twitter. Ukrainian media later found out that the man, Yury Shapovalov, was a botanist who specialized in cactuses.

Ukraine and human rights groups have said that such “confessions” seem to be made under duress and serve the purpose of spreading fear among parts of the population (see Newsletter 27).²⁹

The use of similar practices against journalists and social media users has likely contributed to the fact that public criticism of the authorities has become an extremely

rare phenomenon in the “People’s Republics”. This was highlighted by the case of Stanislav Aseyev, a blogger and journalist from Donetsk who vanished in the summer of 2017.

In August, Russian State TV station Rossiya 24 broadcast an interview with Aseyev, in which he admits to have spied for Ukraine’s Military Intelligence Agency. Radio Liberty, the US broadcaster for whom Aseyev had worked under the pseudonym of Stanislav Vasin, said that the interview was “highly questionable” because it was unclear “when it was made (and) under what conditions or duress” (see Newsletter 40).³⁰ In September, OSCE envoy and Swiss diplomat Toni Frisch met Aseyev in Donetsk but said that the meeting was confidential.³¹

The separatists have to this day released no information about Aseyev.

Following Aseyev’s case, critical publications from inside the “People’s Republics” have been largely limited to “systemic” opposition figures who support integration with Russia, like early Donetsk separatist leader Pavel Gubarev, separatist fighter turned blogger Alexander Zhuchkovsky and the political analyst Roman Manekin.

The separatists are also believed to continue their restrictive policy of accrediting foreign journalists. However, the international media interest remains low, and no accreditation rejections became public.

Russian activists complain about abuse

In June, the Russian performance artist Katrin Nenasheva said that she and her male friend were detained, beaten and abused during a visit to Donetsk in late May.³² Nenasheva, who had been visiting relatives in neighbouring Horlivka, said that they were brought to the border with Russia the next day and released. The separatists never commented on her accusations.

In January, two Russian transgender activists vanished after travelling to Donetsk for an art performance. The activists, Oleg Vasilyev and Victoria Miroshnichenko, resurfaced in February saying that they had been detained before they could carry out their plans. In an interview with the Russian news site Meduza, Vasilyev said that they were treated relatively well.³³

There was also fresh evidence of discrimination against religious minorities. Among the main victims were Baptists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose premises in Donetsk and Luhansk were raided and seized (see Newsletter 40).³⁴ The

separatists also attempted to use the controversy over the Ukrainian Orthodox Church for their purposes, when both Zakharchenko and Pasechnik warned of “religious war” in July. However, the issue did not surface again and seems to have been put on the agenda entirely by Moscow (see Newsletter 39).³⁵

Prospects

In the fifth year of their existence, the “People’s Republics” are showing political instability, internal dissonances and even violence. However, there are no signs of them going away as the basic military and economic support from Russia continues.

The question of the separatists’ support from the local population remains central for the ongoing discussions for a peaceful solution. Reliable data about this is scarce and disputed. A survey conducted by telephone for the Ukrainian Information Policy Ministry in December 2017 found that the number of respondents inside the Donetsk “People’s Republic” who say that they see themselves as “DNR” citizens has fallen to 13 per cent – down from 18 per cent in 2016.³⁶

However, that survey also found that 41 per cent of respondents inside the “DNR” said that they identify more with Russians than with Ukrainians proper. And another 34 per cent said that they identify neither with Russians nor with Ukrainians.

More specifically, the poll found that more people inside the separatist-held areas of the Donetsk Region claim that the ongoing conflict is a civil war (55 per cent, up from 44 per cent in 2016) and that the share of those, who see it as a war with Russia has fallen from 14 to eight per cent. This suggests that the Russian narrative is winning over the Ukrainian one.

These findings can be taken as indication that Russian and separatist propaganda have been successful in shaping public opinion. Emine Dzhaparova, Ukraine’s First Deputy Information Minister, admitted this in April and noted that Ukrainian media have practically no influence in the “People’s Republics”. She added that this can change only after government control is established there.³⁷

However, there are reservations about surveys from non-government-held areas. Telephone data tends to be biased because respondents fear that intelligence agencies are listening. Suspicion that the separatists are actively trying to suppress the gathering of sociological data was confirmed in September, when Alexander

Kazakov, the former PR adviser to the slain Alexander Zakharchenko, said in an interview that opinion polls are banned in the “DNR” and that those who conduct them will be detained.³⁸

One positive aspect is the high level of movement between both sides of the dividing “Line of Contact”. According to data from the United Nations, more than one million crossings of this line took place every month between January and May 2018, approximately 33,500 unique crossings each day. This is an increase of 31 per cent in comparison to the same period in 2017, when daily crossings were 25,500, the refugee agency UNHCR said in a report released in September.³⁹

On the downside, most of the movement is motivated by sheer economic need. According to the UNHCR, 90 per cent of those crossing are residents of separatist-held areas, and fifty per cent of them are 60 years or older. This is because Ukraine requires pensioners to register in government-controlled areas at least every 60 days in order to receive their payments – a practice that has been criticized as discriminatory by Human Rights Groups.⁴⁰

In a clear sign that they view people to people contacts as a threat, the separatists imposed new travel restrictions at the beginning of 2018. The “DNR” said in January, that its state servants were barred from entering government-controlled Ukraine. As a reason, the separatist cited the risk of being recruited by Ukrainian intelligence as spies.⁴¹

The “LNR” has a similar ban in place and reportedly also requires state servants to get permission from superiors before travelling to Russia. The Luhansk separatists have also banned “government” workers from using the Ukrainian-run Vodafone mobile phone network, according to a Russian media report.⁴²

Under these conditions, it is hard to make predictions of the future. While it is especially difficult to gauge the political situation, it is probably fair to say that the “People’s Republics”’ key weakness remains their lack of economic self-sufficiency. The day on which Russia decides that the burden to support them is too much could be decisive in this conflict, which is otherwise governed by geopolitical considerations.

Short chronology

The „People’s Republics“ of Donetsk and Luhansk were proclaimed by pro-Russian activists in April 2014, following protests in both cities against the new Ukrainian government. Ukrainian media and officials have accused Moscow of actively supporting the unrest, e.g. by sending “activists” from Russia across the border.

The first year of their existence was dominated by chaos and violence, as the war with government forces escalated. The situation calmed after the Minsk agreement was finalized in February 2015. Since then, the “contact line” (frontline) between Ukrainian government forces and the armed formations remains stable.

While they pretend to be independent states, the “People’s Republics” cannot survive without covert military and economic support from Russia. Their independence has been recognized by no other state save South Ossetia, itself a separatist region in Georgia that is heavily dependent on Russia.

Despite playing a crucial role for their creation and continued existence, Russia does not recognize the “People’s Republics” but officially supports the Minsk agreement, which stipulates that the separatist-held areas shall negotiate their return into the Ukrainian state with the government in Kiev.

While formally obeying the agreement’s letters, Moscow routinely ignores its spirit by supporting the “People’s Republics” politically, economically and, crucially, with military staff and hardware. Furthermore, Russian politicians and state media continue to depict Ukraine as a puppet state, run by foreign powers hostile to Russia. The separatists, in turn, talk tirelessly about integration with Russia, saying that they won’t return to Ukraine as long as it is run by a pro-Western government.

Both “People’s Republics” on paper possess democratic state institutions. A unicameral parliament, a two-party system, courts and an executive run by a president (called “leader”) and a cabinet of ministers. In practice, however, there is almost no political pluralism, no freedom of expression and media freedom. Political participation is limited to those who support the idea of independence from Ukraine and/or a future union with Russia.

DRA e.V.

is a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Berlin, working since 1992 with the aim of promoting democratic developments in Russia and other East European countries through cooperation with Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian and other European NGOs, with independent mass media and in cross-sectoral cooperation. The DRA offers youth and other exchange programs in the field of political education, democracy and active citizenship and works to establish links with Western partners. Moreover, the DRA acts as an agency for volunteers between Eastern and Western Europe.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=3066302&3066302>
- 2 <https://dnrsovet.su/there-are-suspects-deputy-alexander-kostenko-comments-on-investigation-into-assassination-of-head-of-dpr/>
- 3 <https://dan-news.info/politics/kostenko-slozhil-polnomochiya-lidera-frakcii-doneckaya-respublika-izbran-novyy-rukovoditel.html>
- 4 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-05-10-september-2018-newsletter-42/>
- 5 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-06-12-june-2018-newsletter-32/>
- 6 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-28-june-3-july-2018-newsletter-35/>
- 7 <https://dan-news.info/obschestvo/odin-iz-rukovoditelej-apk-dnr-obvinil-timofeeva-v-zaxvate-sobstvennosti-na-850-mln-rublej.html> and <https://dan-news.info/ekonomika/ya-prosto-u-vas-otzhal-biznes-transportnye-kompanii-dnr-obvinili-timofeeva-v-zaxvate-ix-biznesa.html>
- 8 http://expert.ru/russian_reporter/2018/18/kto-ubil---vragi-ili-predateli/
- 9 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-26-april-23-may-2017-newsletter-22/>
- 10 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29492550.html>
- 11 <http://dnr-live.ru/novye-naznacheniya-v-dnr-vitse-premeryi-glava-vs/>
- 12 <https://vz.ru/news/2018/9/9/941039.html> and https://vk.com/wall151630709_96727
- 13 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-21-september-2-october-2018-newsletter-44-45/> and <https://cikdnr.su/2018/10/05/cik-dnr-zavershena-registracija-kandidatov-na-dolznost-glavy-respubliki/>
- 14 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-05-10-september-2018-newsletter-42/>
- 15 <https://tass.ru/politika/5574190>
- 16 <https://meduza.io/feature/2018/09/04/pochemu-ubili-zaharchenko-konflikt-dnr-s-kievom-snova-obostritsya>
- 17 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-04-28-august-2018-newsletter-40/>
- 18 <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/386477>
- 19 <https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/275521>
- 20 https://twitter.com/OSCE_SMM/status/1045264840938459138
- 21 <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/392627>
- 22 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-26-july-03-august-2018-newsletter-39/>
- 23 <https://dan-news.info/obschestvo/gorlovskij-stirol-zapustil-dva-cexa-neobodimyx-dlya-polnogo-vozbnovleniya-raboty-predpriyatiya.html>
- 24 <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/donbass-realii/29251293.html>
- 25 <https://dan-news.info/ekonomika/shaxtery-dnr-v-2016-godu-dobyli-bolee-12-mln-tonn-uglya-zametno-prevzoidya-pokazateli-2015-go.html> and <http://smdnr.ru/s-nachala-goda-gospredpriyatiya-respubliki-dobyli-odin-million-tonn-uglya/>
- 26 <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/ukraine-raises-coal-imports-by-42-9-percent-in-5-months.html>
- 27 <https://dan-news.info/politics/pushilin-pobeshhal-sotrudnikam-zavoda-silur-reshit-vopros-obespecheniya-predpriyatiya-syrem.html>
- 28 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-13-18-may-2018-newsletter-29/>
- 29 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-05-february-27-april-2018-newsletter-27/>
- 30 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-04-28-august-2018-newsletter-40/>
- 31 <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/2536926-osce-coordinator-meets-with-militants-hostage-aseyev.html>
- 32 <http://novosti.dn.ua/news/282862-khudozhnyca-soobshhyla-o-tom-cto-ee-zaderzhaly-y-pytaly-boevyky-dnr>
- 33 <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/a-transgender-activists-surprisingly-cordial-capture-by-donetsk-rebels-57166>
- 34 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-04-28-august-2018-newsletter-40/>
- 35 <http://www.civicmonitoring.org/developments-in-dnr-and-lnr-26-july-03-august-2018-newsletter-39/>
- 36 <https://goo.gl/T3aFMJ>
- 37 <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-presshall/2446006-osobennosti-soznania-i-identichnosti-zitelej-podkontrolnyh-i-okkupirovannyh-territorij-doneckoj-oblasti.html>
- 38 <http://novosti.dn.ua/news/284807-v-dnr-govoryat-cto-tekh-kto-provodyt-oprosy-v-donecke-zaderzhyvayut>
- 39 <http://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2018/09/Freedom-of-movement-across-the-line-of-contact-in-eastern-Ukraine-2.pdf>
- 40 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/31/ukraine-ensure-all-pensioners-have-access-benefits>
- 41 <https://dnr-online.ru/gossluzhashhim-vremmenno-zapreshhen-vyezd-na-territoriyu-ukrainy/>
- 42 <http://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2018/03/08/1686788.html>

Current events in the “People’s Republics” of eastern Ukraine

2018 saw major political tensions in separatist-controlled Donetsk, culminating in the assassination of local leader Alexander Zakharchenko on August 31. Power in the Donetsk “People’s Republic” (“DNR”) subsequently shifted to Denis Pushilin, the longtime Minsk negotiator, who has a reputation of being highly manageable and of having the Kremlin’s trust.

The political strife before Zakharchenko’s assassination, the purge of his allies afterwards and the lack of public debate about who is guilty strongly suggest that the longtime separatist leader’s killing was either ordered or tolerated by Moscow. Under Pushilin, Russia undoubtedly increased its political, military and economic control over the “DNR”, bringing it to levels seen in the neighbouring Luhansk “People’s Republic” (“LNR”).

The fact that Pushilin is a more flexible and civilian personality than the warlord-like Zakharchenko does not make a solution easier. The same can be said about the Luhansk “People’s Republic” (“LNR”) under the leadership of the intelligence officer Leonid Pasechnik.

However, questions abound about both “People’s Republics”’ internal stability. The fact that its leaders both consolidated power only after purging their predecessors’ supporters and that no credible competitors are expected to challenge them in the November 11 “elections” does not speak of high internal consolidation.

Overall, the fundamentals governing the conflict remain unchanged. There are strong indications that Moscow’s goal is to maintain hotbeds of instability and deeply anti-western Trojan Horses in Ukraine’s flank. Under these circumstances, the best Ukraine can do is project good governance and prosperity into the areas it does not control and hope that the growing economic burden and/or ungovernability will make Russia rethink its support for the “People’s Republics”.

The report covers events in the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” over the period from January until October 2018. It is part of the project „Human Rights Monitoring in Eastern Ukraine“ of DRA e.V. Berlin and it is based on background interviews and the analysis of open internet sources.