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Events in the “People’s Republics” of eastern Ukraine

Annual Report 2019



Imprint

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Program: Human Rights Monitoring in eastern Ukraine



Implemented with support from the Federal Foreign Office of Germany



Federal Foreign Office

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This report is mostly based on the monitoring and analysis of open source information – media reports and social media posts from non-government-controlled and government-controlled areas of Ukraine and from Russia. It also draws from interviews with sources in Ukraine and Russia.

DRA e.V. is a Berlin-based non-profit organization focusing on international civil society cooperation, democracy promotion and youth exchange. Established in 1992, DRA has been actively involved in eastern Europe for many years, partnering up with independent NGOs and grassroots initiatives in many regions of the post-Soviet space.

Preface

The year 2019 brought big political change to Ukraine with the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy as President, but the “People’s Republics” largely remained as they were in late 2018. While there was unprecedented progress in negotiations to implement the Minsk agreement in the second half of the year, separatist leaders stepped up their anti-Ukrainian rhetoric while paying lip service to the agreement, which stipulates re-integration into Ukraine. The issuing of Russian passports to the local population was the most visible example of this.

In a sign of political consolidation, some prominent separatists were allowed to return to public life after having been deposed and/or exiled in the past years. However, the practice of quietly removing separatist officials also continued.

The “People’s Republics” had little success with solving their greatest problem – to reboot the economy, which suffers heavily from the trade blockade with Ukraine proper. Efforts to attract foreign investment did not result in immediate improvement. Instead, there were

persistent reports of wage arrears and production stops, while the separatists stepped up secrecy and released fewer economic data.

The human rights situation continued to be extremely disturbing with random detentions and long prison sentences being commonplace. This was especially poignant in the run-up to the prisoner exchange with Ukraine in December, when both “People’s Republics” handed down harsh sentences for espionage.

Lastly, the security situation improved due to the implementation of the disengagement agreement of 2016 and the civilian death toll went down significantly. However, combat deaths on the government side remained roughly as high as in the previous year.

Politics

Politics in both “People’s Republics” in 2019 were characterized by stability – after the turbulent events of 2017 and 2018 there were no major changes in power.

In Donetsk, separatist leader Denis Pushilin performed more or less smoothly as a loyal servant to the Kremlin – Pushilin is believed to be close to Vladislav Surkov, who oversees eastern Ukraine in President Vladimir Putin’s administration. Surkov was rumoured to have visited Donetsk in October.¹ However, Pushilin is thought to have little authority himself – the military and security services are directly under Moscow’s control, while economic policymaking lies in the hands of Alexander Ananchenko, the powerful “Prime Minister”.

Ananchenko is thought to come from the secretive Vneshtorgservis holding, which seized key industrial assets after Ukraine initiated a trade blockade in 2017. He appeared the first time in public when he spoke at a convention of the ruling Donetsk Republic movement in November – more than one year after assuming office.²

In Luhansk, separatist leader Leonid Pasechnik appeared less comfortable amid signs of open rivalry with Interior “Minister” and police chief Igor Kornet. In September, Pasechnik did not deny rumours that Kornet had been temporarily arrested and kept a suspiciously low profile when Kornet subsequently waged a campaign against “Ukrainian agents” in connection with a mysterious explosion that damaged a bridge in Luhansk (Newsletter 64).³

Kornet rose to prominence in November 2017, when he publicly quarreled with then-separatist leader Igor Plotnitsky, who was subsequently deposed in an armed coup. However, Kornet was passed over and Plotnitsky’s position was given to Pasechnik, the hitherto little-known “LNR” intelligence chief.

In what is probably no coincidence, in October a long-term deputy of Kornet was quietly promoted to First Deputy Prime Minister, the second-highest post in the “LNR” government. Yury Govtvin even temporarily took over “Prime Minister” Sergei Kozlov’s duties when he signed decrees in November. Govtvin’s departure from the Trade and Industry Ministry, which he led since April, was nowhere mentioned in official media – unusual even for the secretive “LNR” (Newsletter 67).⁴

Disgraced separatists return

If Govtvin’s promotion was a deal to contain infighting between rival factions, it was not the only one. Both “People’s Republics” last year saw the return of some prominent separatists who had previously been

removed from office and/or were exiled in Russia.

The most well-known of them is field commander Alexander Khodakovsky, who reappeared in Donetsk in June. A former commander of a Ukrainian special police unit, Khodakovsky played a prominent role in 2014 and 2015, even becoming Secretary of the “Security Council”. However, he quarreled with then separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko who first stripped him from his post and later forced him to move to Russia.

After Zakharchenko’s assassination on 31 August 2018, Russian border guards prevented Khodakovsky to travel to Donetsk where he wanted to participate in elections as Zakharchenko’s successor. Upon his return in June 2019, Khodakovsky said that all his disagreements with the Russian government had been solved and that he had “no intention to storm big politics on a local level”.⁵ It is unclear whether he still commands the armed formation “Vostok”, which he founded in 2014.

Also in June, Alexander Kofman, who had been sacked as “Foreign Minister” in 2016, returned as chairman of the “DNR” Public Chamber, a newly-created consultative body. Days later in Luhansk, Alxei Karyakin, who had been sacked as “Parliamentary Speaker” in 2016, was elected to head the “LNR” Public Chamber (Newsletter 59).⁶ While the Public Chambers are purely ceremonial, their chairmanships obviously serve to reintegrate former critics into the system – especially Karyakin, an outspoken member of the separatists’ more radical ideological wing.

In September, Dmitry Trapeznikov, an erstwhile deputy and initial successor of slain “DNR” leader Zakharchenko, suddenly appeared in the Russian republic of Kalmykia, where he was appointed mayor of the regional capital Elista. Trapeznikov, whose first weeks in office were accompanied by considerable local opposition, is thought to have been installed by Kremlin “curator” Surkov personally, who issued a congratulatory statement on the occasion (Newsletter 65).⁷

Suspicious Sackings in Donetsk

The “People’s Republics” also continued the tradition of removing officials quickly with little or no explanation. Hardest hit was the Free Donbass movement, which acts as a quasi-opposition party in the “DNR” while being subservient to the separatist leadership. Three of the movement’s originally 26 MPs lost their seats in 2019. In April, Sergei Sverchkov was expelled from the separatist parliament for “loss of trust”. Sverchkov was apparently arrested in March on accusation of bribe-taking. Nothing has been heard of him since. In early December, the movement’s leader Yevgeny Orlov was expelled from parliament under the same pretext (Newsletter 68).⁸ And on 20 December, the parliament said that three

MPs including prominent Free Donbass figure Sergei Tsyplakov had “voluntarily resigned”.⁹

There was no further explanation for any of these sackings and resignations. The dnr-live news portal, which is associated with Free Donbass founder Pavel Gubarev, did not report any of them. Gubarev and his wife Yekaterina have been sidelined from “DNR” politics since he was prevented from standing in the 2018 leadership elections. The website of Free Donbass has not been updated since January 2019.¹⁰

In October, Free Donbass lost its only representative in the “government”, when Telecoms “Minister” Viktor Yatsenko was sacked without explanation. Unlike his parliamentary colleagues, Yatsenko published a farewell letter on his ministry website.¹¹

It was unclear whether Yatsenko was fired because of his ties to Gubarev or because of personal wrongdoing. His sacking prompted speculation that “DNR” authorities and/or Moscow were cracking down against embezzlement in connection to the Phoenix mobile phone carrier – which was set up under his direction on hardware seized from Ukraine’s KyivStar carrier. No accusations have been made officially, but days later an unconfirmed report from Luhansk said that the director of the “LNR” phone carrier Lugakom had been detained on embezzlement charges.¹²

Surkov v Kozak

The fact that the “People’s Republics” are more or less managed from Moscow manifests itself most clearly when both introduce similar policies in tandem – without any explanation. Thus, both “DNR” and “LNR” introduced Youth Parliaments and Public Chambers – consultative assemblies very similar to those already existing in Russia (Newsletter 52).¹³ In October, both “Republics” carried out censuses, again without explaining why they both had the same idea at the same time (see the section “Society” of this report).

However, it is not always clear who in Moscow is responsible for this management. Officially, Kremlin aide Surkov and deputy prime minister Dmitry Kozak both oversee Russian policies in eastern Ukraine – with Surkov being responsible for politics, ideology and propaganda, Kozak for the economy. In addition, Russia’s Defence Ministry and Federal Security Service (FSB) are thought to directly control the “People’s Militias” and “Ministries” for State Security and the Interior in Donetsk and Luhansk.

Cooperation between these players is far from smooth – this was shown during the Luhansk Putsch 2017, when forces loyal to “DNR” leader Zakharchenko helped to overthrow “LNR” leader Plotnitsky, who was replaced by FSB protégé Pasechnik. The assassination of Zakharchenko one year later also bore the hallmarks

of competing forces vying for power, with the Kremlin winning the upper hand.

Moreover, there is considerable disagreement between Surkov and Kozak. This was directly confirmed by Moscow political scientist and Surkov protégé Alexei Chesnakov. In an interview on his own website in August, Chesnakov argued that Kozak is ready to “hand over Donbass” (i.e. the “People’s Republics”) to anyone who would pay for rebuilding the economy in exchange for lifting western sanctions against Russia. Chesnakov refuted this view by arguing that an end to the sanctions regime was unlikely because the US would not lift theirs even if the EU abolished its sanctions. He added that the sanctions were a price worth paying for the “blood spilled in Ukraine”, for which he blamed the United States.¹⁴

By the end of the year it became clear that despite rumours that his competencies had been curtailed,¹⁵ Surkov had prevailed over Kozak. Before and after the Paris “Normandy Four” summit on 9 December, separatist leaders reiterated that they want to join Russia rather than reintegrate to Ukraine and took a hard line against President Zelenskiy, whom they accused of continuing Poroshenko’s policies versus Donbass.¹⁶ Notably, in the weeks before the summit, separatist media waged a disinformation campaign in which they claimed (based on a fake letter) that Kyiv would implement reintegration by deporting pro-Russian minded civilians to other parts of Ukraine (Newsletter 68).¹⁷

Russian Passports

The aggressively unwelcoming stance against Zelenskiy actually began directly after the former TV entertainer’s election on 21 April. Three days later, the Kremlin published a decree that allows holders of “DNR” and “LNR” passports to receive fast-track Russian citizenship without having to give up other citizenships. The decision was denounced by Ukraine, her allies and by the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) as undermining the Minsk agreement. While the separatists hailed it as a watershed, it quickly became clear that far from everybody would receive them.

According to the Russian Ministry of the Interior, during the coming six months some 100,000 passports were issued to inhabitants of the “People’s Republics” – many of them were bused across the border with Russia to pick them up.¹⁸ This is less than three per cent of an estimated population of three million and experts questioned whether Russia is really interested in absorbing all of them. While some analysts suggested that the passports would be given first to separatist officials and fighters to enable them to move to Russia in case of reintegration, others suggested that their issuing was being restricted to prevent that the newly-minted citizens move to

Russia too quickly, thus worsening the brain drain and depleting the frontline of fighters.¹⁹

Moscow’s “passportization” policy also raised fears that Russia may justify future military incursions with the need to defend its own citizens – as it did in South Ossetia in 2008. However, such a scenario is unlikely as Russian and Russian-controlled troops are already plentiful in the “People’s Republics”. More likely the move aims to assuage the local population in the face of Zelenskiy’s popularity – in the Luhansk region he won almost 90 per cent in the second round of the presidential election – and widespread frustration by the situation inside the “People’s Republics”.

Compromises?

While Moscow did cooperate with Kyiv on those issues that it set as conditions for a “Normandy 4” summit – notably the Russian-Ukrainian prisoner exchange on 7 September, military disengagement and the so-called Steinmeier Formula, the Kremlin and the separatists adamantly refused to even consider concessions that would make it easier for Zelenskiy to implement the Minsk agreement – that is allowing Ukrainian politicians and officials to participate in the local elections envisaged by the agreement.

While Zelenskiy has insisted that Ukraine should have control of the border with Russia before the election, Putin stressed in his annual press conference on 19 December that this should happen only after the elections – as written in the Minsk agreement.²⁰

Surrounding the Paris summit, the separatists took more steps that run counter to reintegration with Ukraine. The “DNR” on 29 November passed a law that defines the “state boundary” as identical with the Ukrainian Donetsk region – thus laying claim to the government-controlled areas, which comprises almost half of the region’s inhabitants and two thirds of the territory. The “LNR” followed suit in December with an unexplained 20-days lag (Newsletters 68 and 69).²¹

“DNR” leader Pushilin also suggested to abolish Ukrainian as a state language and remove it as an obligatory subject from school curricula. He explained that this was necessary because of the intensification of integration with Russia.²²

International relations

The “People’s Republics” also continued to claim their own international relations – despite the fact that no country save separatist South Ossetia – has recognized them. “DNR” leader Pushilin even decreed a foreign policy conception that envisages UN membership.²³ The “DNR” Foreign Ministry prided itself that more than 20

international agreements were signed in 2019 –the most significant apparently being those with the assemblies of Russian-annexed Crimea, South Ossetia and the “LNR”.²⁴

The “Ministry” also claimed that more than 600 people from 25 countries paid official visits to the “DNR” last year.²⁵ However, most of them were pro-Russian activists from the extreme political right or left - the only foreign dignitaries at the “Republic’s” fifth anniversary on 11 May were South Ossetian President Anatoly Bibilov, Abkhaz Prime Minister Valery Bganba (lower in rank because Abkhazia does not recognize the “People’s Republics”) and “LNR” leader Leonid Pasechnik. Russia sent some Duma members and a congratulatory letter by Kremlin aide Surkov (Newsletter 56).²⁶

Some of the visits resulted in the opening of new “DNR” representative offices – Belgian activist Kris Roman opened one in his private home in the city of Dendermonde (Newsletter 66).²⁷ In February “LNR” Foreign “Minister” Vladislav Deinego announced the opening of a “cultural centre” in Kolwezi, a city in southern Kongo - there is no evidence however, that it actually opened (Newsletter 52).²⁸

Economy

The separatists also tried to build international relations in order to overcome the deepening economic crisis in the “People’s Republics”. In June, “DNR” leader Pushilin for the first time visited the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, where he said that he wanted to find foreign partners willing to cooperate with “DNR” companies (Newsletter 58).²⁹

In October, the “DNR” held an “International Investment Forum” in Donetsk, where separatist leaders pledged to introduce a tax-free offshore zone for foreign investors. While official media boasted that foreign visitors signed agreements worth 135.6 billion Russian roubles (1.9 billion euros), these visitors were either little-known or unwilling to appear in public. One of them was Frenchman Didier Chaudesaygues, who heads the little-known Russo-French Economic Chamber, which resembles but is distinct from the official Franco-Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Newsletter 67).³⁰

“DNR” officials also made the first known business-related visit to a country other than Russia, when they visited the Rebuild Syria trade fair in Damascus in September. During the visit, telecoms minister Yatsenko said that he wanted to aid Syria with digitalization, while the “DNR” delegation discussed the opening of a trade representation.³¹ However, nothing was heard of this again, and Yatsenko was fired less than a month later.

Fundamentally, the dire situation faced by the “People’s Republics” remained unchanged. Their coal- and metals-

orientated economy has been cut off from established supply chains in Ukraine by the trade blockade of 2017, it is toxic for foreign investors who risk being hit by sanctions and it is unwelcome competition for Russia, which already has obsolete mining and metals sectors.

An attempt to negotiate lifting the blockade failed in May, when Ukraine demanded the return of seized industrial assets and the re-introduction of the hryvnia, two conditions that the separatists rejected (Newsletter 58).³²

Moreover, it looks like that in terms of the economy the past year was particularly bad for the separatists. This was suggested by “DNR” Revenue “Minister” Yevgeny Lavrenov, who said in a wide-ranging end-of-the-year interview with the Information “Ministry” that 2019 was “difficult”. Lavrenov singled out the mining sector which he said was in a very bad situation and blamed both a global economic downturn and the fact the “DNR” was unrecognized for the situation.³³ He added that small and medium-sized business were paying more taxes than large corporations because they were less dependent on outside factors.³⁴

Secrecy up as numbers go down

However, Lavrenov’s comments were difficult to back up, because both “People’s Republics” released even less economic figures than in past years. The Economic Development “Ministry” said that Metallurgy had the biggest share (36.8 per cent) of industrial production the first 11 months of 2019, but revealed output numbers only for pork and dairy production.³⁵

The “DNR” official “DAN” news site reported that coal production in 2019 was 8 million tonnes but mentioned the figure only in passing under the headline that 44 million tonnes had been produced since 2014. The figure suggests that coal production went down from 8,2 million tonnes in 2018.³⁶ The “LNR” did not publish coal production figures by the time of publication of this report.³⁷

In addition, company information, notably about the notoriously secretive Vneshtorgservis holding, was removed from the websites of the “DNR” Trade and Industry Chamber and of the Industry “Ministry” (Newsletter 63).³⁸ Vneshtorgservis, also abbreviated VTS, controls key privately-held plants since both “DNR” and “LNR” seized them in retaliation to the trade blockade in 2017. Said to be registered in South Ossetia, the company is widely believed to be controlled by Serhiy Kurchenko, a Ukrainian businessman linked to the family of former President Viktor Yanukovich whom he followed into exile in Russia.³⁹

It is unknown who currently runs Vneshtorgservis, which has no public records or a website. Company

CEO Vladimir Pashkov joined the “DNR” government as a deputy Prime Minister in April, when Pushilin basically tasked him to solve the “Republic’s” economic problems.⁴⁰ Because Prime Minister Ananchenko is also a former executive, the company is suspected to be running the entire “DNR” economy. According to Lavrenov, Vneshtorgservis accounts for 70 per cent of the “DNR” tax revenue.⁴¹

However, Vneshtorgservis has reportedly accumulated massive debt against its daughter companies. The Russian news portal RBC reported in November that the holding owes some 25 billion roubles (365 million euros) to plants and coalmines in both “People’s Republics”, and that it has been allowed to postpone the repayment of 8 billion roubles (118 million euros) for another two years.⁴²

While official media rarely mention them, wage arrears appeared to be widespread in both “People’s Republics” in 2019 according to social media posts and Ukrainian media reports. Thus, the Ukrainian Eastern Human Rights Group said in January 2020 that workers of at least six “DNR” mines had not or only partially been paid in November and December 2019.⁴³

Arrears in November were also reported at the Donetsk Metallurgy Plant, whose workforce is said to have been almost halved from 8,000 in 2014 to some 4,500.⁴⁴ Workers quoted in Ukrainian media said in March that the Vneshtorgservis-administered plant is at the verge of closure because it cannot sell products nor receive raw materials. Similar troubles were reported at the time from the Donetsk Electrotechnical Plant (Newsletter 53).⁴⁵

In February, “DNR” leader Pushilin admitted wage arrears at the Stirof pharmaceutical plant in Horlivka but promised that workers will get paid soon. However, a Ukrainian media report said in December that Stirof was practically standing still and that the 900 remaining workers (of a pre-war workforce of 4,500) have not been paid in the last three months of 2019.⁴⁶

Workers at the Silur cable factory in Khartsyzk went unpaid after the plant was handed to an obscure Russian “administrator” in the summer. In November, a leaked audio recording from a workers’ assembly at the plant suggested that production remained idle. However, Revenue Minister Lavrenov claimed in late December that the plant’s work had “finally been stabilized” because Vneshtorgservis was supplying iron and that workers had been paid.⁴⁷

Pushilin promises economic boom

Despite all this, separatist leaders’ rhetoric was full of optimism. During a staged question and answer show

in December, “DNR” leader Pushilin said that 2020 would bring a breakthrough in restarting production at idling plants and new jobs.⁴⁸ Pushilin also promised that pensions and wages would be raised in the “DNR” so that they would equal those in the neighbouring Russian Rostov region by 2022.⁴⁹

In June, both Pushilin and his “LNR” colleague Pasechnik announced massive increases in public sector wages and pensions. Wages would rise by 70 per cent - 35 per cent in June and another 35 per cent in January 2020. Pensions would rise 52 per cent in the same period. Neither Pushilin nor Pasechnik said where the money comes from, nor did they offer an explanation why their announcements were almost identical and published simultaneously on 13 June – which strongly suggests that the decision was taken in Moscow (Newsletter 59).⁵⁰

The “DNR” average wage in July stood at 11,877 Russian roubles, and while no figure for the “LNR” is available, separatist leader Pasechnik promised in 2018 to raise teachers’ average wages from 5,000 to 10,500 roubles (154 euros) by 2023.⁵¹ Last year’s average wages in the (government-controlled) Donetsk region were 11,769 hryvnya (30,000 roubles or 440 euros), in the Russian Rostov region it was 36,800 roubles.⁵²

Unsurprisingly, the “People’s Republics” suffer from a serious brain drain. In March, the separatist-appointed mayor of Donetsk Alexei Kulemzin admitted that many of the city’s communal workers were leaving because wages were too low. And health ministers in both “LNR” and “DNR” complained that they cannot attract young doctors to work for less than 5,000 roubles a month (Newsletter 53).⁵³

Russia, which is believed to subsidize the “People’s Republics” with at least 2 billion euros per year, announced in 2018 that it would finance wage rises there.⁵⁴ The Russian Emergency Service Ministry also continued to send aid convoys to Donetsk and Luhansk, albeit with an unexplained six-month hiatus between January and July 2018. In October the convoys resumed on a weekly basis, arriving every Thursday. The twelfth and last arrived on 19 December.

Because neither OSCE observers nor Ukrainian customs officers are allowed to inspect the convoy’s freight, there is no independent information of what the convoys actually deliver. The separatists and Russia claim that it is children’s food and Christmas presents, but a former separatist-appointed mayor of Horlivka, Eduard Matyukha, said that among their freight is Russian cash for the “People’s Republics”, which are cut off from international banking links.⁵⁵

Human Rights and Society

The infamous State Security “Ministries”, known by their Russian acronym MGB, continued to act with impunity and outside any international rules or accountability. Seemingly random people were hit by arrests and harsh sentences, especially in the run-up to the prisoner exchange with Ukraine in December, when at least nine prison sentences of up to 17 years were handed down. However, these sentences are a formal condition for the victims’ participation in a prisoner swap.

The December 29 swap resulted in the release of 76 prisoners from the “People’s Republics” – in exchange for 127 prisoners from Ukraine – but that is far from all those detained there. Ukrainian negotiator Valeria Lutkovska said afterwards that some 300 prisoners remain in detention in the People’s Republics”. Rights activists said that the detentions and sentences continue unabatedly and accused the separatists of detaining people as hostages.⁵⁶

One striking aspect is that the victims included minivan drivers who offered rides across the contact line into government-controlled areas. In November and December the “DNR” alone sentenced four such chauffeurs to between 5 and 17 years of jail. They were blamed either for spying for Ukraine or for weapons smuggling (Newsletter 67 and 69).⁵⁷ There were at least four drivers among the 25 people released by the “LNR”.⁵⁸

Some of those released told harrowing stories of torture and isolation – the most prominent being journalist Stanislav Aseyev who told US-funded Radio Liberty, for whom he had reported under pseudonym, that he was first beaten with batons and later tortured with electrical shocks after his detention in 2017. Aseyev, whose name is also spelt Asieiev, was sentenced to 15 years for espionage and “extremism” earlier in 2019 for writing critical reports from the “DNR” (Newsletter 66).⁵⁹ Eduard Aloyan, one of the drivers released by the “LNR”, told a Ukrainian reporter merely that his 1.5 years in detention were “hell on earth”.⁶⁰

The case of Aseyev also highlights the separatists’ paranoia about criticism from within. The journalist recalled that he was found guilty of extremism for putting “DNR” in inverted commas in his texts – because this undermines “state sovereignty” and implies others to do the same.

Pushilin unhappy with separatist media

However, the separatist leadership and/or their Russian overlords were clearly unhappy with their own “state” media. During a 28 December discussion with editors-in-chief, “DNR” leader Pushilin said that “republican” outlets need to fundamentally change their work in order to

win the “information war” with Ukraine. Pushilin said that the media’s content needs to be more “interesting, lively and controversial”, suggesting that he finds it dull and uniform.⁶¹

As progress in the Minsk negotiations prompted more talk of reintegration, the question of identity and loyalties inside the “People’s Republics” gained salience again. A survey released in November suggested that 64 per cent want the areas to become part of Russia, while just 18.5 per cent said they wanted to remain in Ukraine and another 16 per cent wanted independence. However, the survey’s methods and results were strongly criticized by experts, who argued, among other things, that it is impossible to carry out proper polling inside the People’s Republics”.⁶²

By contrast, a less controversial survey conducted by telephone released in August by the Berlin-based ZOiS think tank found that a majority of almost 55 per cent wants the “People’s Republics” to be part of Ukraine, while 45.5 per cent opted for Russia.⁶³

Discussions about popular sentiment invariably must take into account that the present population has been altered by migration – and that those who staid are disproportionately elderly, poor and less educated. At least 1.5 million people are believed to have fled since 2014, and estimates put the “People’s Republics” current population at between 2 and 2.5 million.

Official statistics do not reflect this because they are based on pre-war data. However even they clearly show that both “People’s Republics” are shrinking. According to the separatist-controlled Statistics Offices, the “DNR” had 2,267,753 inhabitants in December 2019 - 19,460 less than one year earlier, while the “LNR” had lost 14,328 inhabitants to 1,444,797 in December.⁶⁴

The fact that there is no reliable demographic data was probably felt also in Moscow – leading to the conduct of censuses in both “DNR” and “LNR” in the first two weeks of October. While results won’t be published before April 2020, a Donetsk census worker quoted in local media said that up to 40 per cent of local apartments are empty.

Security

In terms of security, 2019 was less tense than previous years. The number of civilian casualties went down again and the sides agreed to disengage forces at three locations, notably at Stanytsia Luhanska, which made it possible to repair the badly damaged bridge over the river Donets, the only civilian crossing point in the entire Luhansk Region.

The OSCE Mission in Ukraine recorded 19 civilian deaths and 128 injuries in the course of 2019, the lowest figures since the conflict began in 2014. In 2018, 43 civilians were killed and another 192 injured.⁶⁵ Mission chief Halit Cevik said in September that the “unlimited ceasefire”, which was brokered at the Trilateral Contact Group talks in Minsk in July, was “a major contributing factor towards the improvement of the security situation”.⁶⁶

The truce did not hold completely, however, and the OSCE recorded some 5,000 ceasefire violations per week in the four weeks before 8 December. By mid-December, 97 Ukrainian servicemen and -women had been killed in action, according to Defence Ministry figures reported by the BBC. In 2018, that figure had been 110.⁶⁷ The “DNR” said in December that 149 of its fighters were killed in the course of the year.⁶⁸ No reliable figures were available from the “LNR”.

The most important security-related development was the troop withdrawal from the Contact Line -two kilometres each - in accordance with the disengagement agreement of 2016. Implementation had been impossible for three years until the Zelenskiy administration agreed in order to fulfil Russia's conditions for the “Normandy Four” summit, which took place in Paris on 9 December.

Withdrawal began in Stanytsia Luhanska in June, a significant concession by the Ukrainian side which gave up the town with a pre-war population of 13,000. Zolote and Petrivske followed suit in November following protests from veterans and Zelenskiy's political opponents. No opposition became known on the separatist side. The opening of the reconstructed bridge in Stanytsia on 20 November was visited by Zelenskiy personally.⁶⁹

The “Normandy Four” (Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France) summit agreed to implement disengagement at three more locations (to be found in negotiations) and the fact that there was no re-engagement in 2019 raises hopes that the sides will implement three more withdrawals by the follow-up summit planned in April 2020.

The withdrawals are a stark contrast to previous years, when government forces advanced into “grey zones” – settlements located between frontline positions and the “Contact Line”, resulting in the sides moving gradually closer to each other. However, disengagement only means withdrawing back 2,000 metres – while the overall number of troops remains the same. Ukrainian estimates say that the separatist “People's Militias” have 32,000 men and women under

arms, while government troops in Donbass are thought to number more than 50,000.⁷⁰

The military stalemate continued last year. Ukraine is deterred from overrunning the relatively weak “People's Militia” by the fact that Russia has stationed a whole army in the Southern Military District with tens of thousands of well-trained troops just across the border from Ukraine.⁷¹

2019 also saw the first acknowledged Ukrainian operation deep inside separatist-controlled areas, when in June a government commando managed to kidnap former field commander Vladimir Tsemakh in the city of Snizhne – some 60 kilometres east of Donetsk. Tsemakh, who commanded air defences in the area in 2014, was taken to Kyiv as a witness in the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, which killed 298 people.⁷²

However, he returned to his native Snizhne after being included in the prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine in September, which saw the release of Crimean filmmaker Oleg Sentsov and 35 Ukrainian sailors detained in Russia after the 2018 Kerch strait incident. The fact that Tsemakh was not given a welcome reception at home suggests that the separatists and their Russian backers are not interested in raising the MH17 tragedy more than necessary. International investigators have blamed Russia for shooting down the Boeing 777 and plan to prosecute prominent former “DNR” field commander and Russian citizen Igor Girkin and three others.⁷³

Outlook

While 2019 saw some unprecedented progress in the search for a political solution in Donbass, this was by no means reflected inside the “People's Republics”. In fact, separatist leaders' rhetoric versus Kyiv and reintegration with Ukraine only hardened. Their regimes remain tightly controlled by Moscow, which clearly sought to consolidate local power structures to avoid the sort of infighting that led to the 2017 coup d'état in Luhansk and the 2018 assassination of Donetsk separatist leader Zakharchenko.

Russia's hard-line stance seems fuelled by its fear of Zelenskiy, whom the Kremlin “welcomed” as President of Ukraine by introducing a citizenship programme for east Ukrainians. Analysts have argued that the Ukrainian President is more dangerous for President Putin than the domestic opposition in Russia.⁷⁴ His chances to project soft power into the “People's Republics” are probably far greater than his predecessor's.

Ukraine could improve efforts to broadcast Russian-language content in both government and non-government-controlled Donbass to counter Russian state media, which has been the preferred source of information here even before 2014. The task of winning back hearts and minds won't be easy, however. The past five years have cemented ideological divisions, which cut through the local population regardless of ethnicity, religion and language.

More fundamentally, Russian "hard and soft power" in Donetsk and Luhansk, from the ruthless State Security "Ministries" to the Russian-commanded "People's Militias" and relentless propaganda from Russian and local media outlets continue to ensure that any local opposition is thwarted early on. And there are no signs that this grip is loosening up.

Sources

Ukrainian Media

- Novosti Donbassa <http://novosti.dn.ua/> One of the most balanced Ukrainian news outlets, originally from Donetsk. Includes Donbass Public TV <http://hromadske.dn.ua/>
- Ostro <http://www.ostro.org/> An independent website with Donbass-related news and analysis, originally from Donetsk.
- Realnaya Gazeta <http://realgazeta.com.ua/> Independent online newspaper, originally from Luhansk.
- Hromadske Radio <https://hromadskeradio.org/>

Media from the “DNR”

- Donetskoe Agentstvo Novostei (DAN) <http://dan-news.info/> The official “DNR” news site, thought to be close to separatist leader Pushilin. Reliable, but publishes only a highly restrictive range of officially-sanctioned news.
- The “Official site of the People’s Republic” <http://dnr-online.ru/> Run by the Information “Ministry”, the site combines text and video reports and contains official lists of “ministries” decrees and the “DNR” constitution.
- Website of Denis Pushilin <https://glavadnr.ru/> and <https://denis-pushilin.ru/> Official texts, videos and links to the “DNR” leader’s social media channels.
- First Republican Channel <http://republic-tv.ru/> The official “DNR” TV channel.
- Union <http://tk-union.tv/> A Donetsk TV station that was brought under separatist control in 2014. Thought to be more popular than “First Republican”.
- DNR Live <http://dnr-live.ru/> a news portal linked to Pavel Gubarev and the Free Donbass (Svobodny Donbass) movement.

Media from the “LNR”

- Luganski Informatsionni Tsentri (LITs) <http://lug-info.com/> The “LNR” official news site, generally less informative than the “DNR” sites.
- Website of Leonid Pasechnik: <https://glava-lnr.info/> The “LNR” leader’s site contains official information, including decrees and the constitution.
- “State television” GTRK <https://gtrklnr.com/> The official “LNR” TV station produces markedly less content than its “DNR” equivalents.
- Istok News Agency <http://miaistok.su/> apparently run by the youth wing of the ruling Peace for Lugansk movement. Rarely differs from LITs.

Russian Media

- Tass news agency <http://tass.ru/> State-run, mostly reliable.
- RIA Novosti news agency <https://ria.ru/> State-run and markedly more partisan than Tass. In close cooperation with propaganda outlets <https://ukraina.ru/>, Sputnik and RT.
- Interfax <https://www.interfax.ru/> Russia’s only private news agency, reliable and independent.
- Komsomolskaya Pravda <https://www.donetsk.kp.ru/> A pro-Kremlin tabloid that has a print version for Donetsk
- Novaya Gazeta <https://novayagazeta.ru/> A Moscow-based newspaper strongly critical of the Kremlin.
- RBC <https://www.rbc.ru/> Liberal media group often critical of the Kremlin.
- Kommersant <https://www.kommersant.ru/> A leading liberal business newspaper.

International Media

- Donbas.Realii <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/p/4986.html> A section of US broadcaster Radio Liberty devoted to Donbass.
- Meduza <https://meduza.io/> A news website, based in Riga, Latvia, strongly critical of the Kremlin.

Endnotes

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- 13 <https://civicmonitoring.org/newsletter52/>
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Annual Report on the events in the “People’s Republics” of eastern Ukraine 2019

The year 2019 brought big political change to Ukraine with the election of Volodymyr Zelenskiy as President, but the “People’s Republics” largely remained as they were in late 2018. While there was unprecedented progress in negotiations to implement the Minsk agreement in the second half of the year, separatist leaders stepped up their anti-Ukrainian rhetoric while paying lip service to the agreement, which stipulates re-integration into Ukraine. The issuing of Russian passports to the local population was the most visible example of this.

In a sign of political consolidation, some prominent separatists were allowed to return to public life after having been deposed and/or exiled in the past years. However, the practice of quietly removing separatist officials also continued.

The “People’s Republics” had little success with solving their greatest problem – to reboot the economy, which suffers heavily from the trade blockade with Ukraine proper. Efforts to attract foreign investment did not result in immediate improvement. Instead, there were persistent reports of wage arrears and production stops, while the separatists stepped up secrecy and released fewer economic data.

The human rights situation continued to be extremely disturbing with random detentions and long prison sentences being commonplace. This was especially poignant in the run-up to the prisoner exchange with Ukraine in December, when both “People’s Republics” handed down harsh sentences for espionage.

Lastly, the security situation improved due to the implementation of the disengagement agreement of 2016 and the civilian death toll went down significantly. However, combat deaths on the government side remained roughly as high as in the previous year.

With the aim of contributing to greater transparency regarding the developments in eastern Ukraine, the program »Human Rights Monitoring in eastern Ukraine« presents this new analysis, compiled by Nikolaus von Twickel.

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