

Russian protectorates entrenched

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

Annual Report 2021/2022

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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.

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.

Preface¹

2021 was the year in which Russia massively stepped up its threats against Ukraine – with a massive troop buildup flanked by President Vladimir Putin’s essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”. The tensions with the West over Moscow’s demands to exclude Ukraine’s accession to NATO did not initially affect the “People’s Republics”, but the russification drive continued. Highlights were the de facto holding of September’s Duma elections on Ukrainian soil and the handing over of major industrial assets to a hitherto obscure Russian “investor” – followed by a Kremlin decree that lifted all trade barriers between Russia and the “Republics”.

This trend culminated in February 2022 with Russia’s recognition of both “DNR” and “LNR” as independent states. But already on 1 January 2022 “DNR”-leader Denis Pushilin claimed in his New Year address, that his Republic “has politically and economically become part of Russia”.²

Despite and also because of near-total dependence on Russia, the region’s underlying troubles got worse: The COVID-19 pandemic continued to wreak havoc, accelerating the depopulation of what used to be Ukraine’s industrial heartland. The crisis once more revealed the “Republics”’ fatal humanitarian dependence on Moscow – which failed to send vaccine in adequate quantities while accelerating a serious brain drain by handing out passports to 100,000s via a fast-track scheme.

The security situation also gradually deteriorated over the year. The regular Trilateral Contact Group talks continued to be mired by political deadlock, although they enabled some notable technical cooperation (see page 9).

The human rights situation remained dire. The infamous State Security “Ministries” continued to abduct, detain and torture dissenters and seemingly innocent locals with almost complete impunity. As a result, civil society is completely stifled and there are no discernible groups or movements that act outside the narrow officially sanctioned framework.

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Politics

“Integration with Russia” was the separatist leaders’ dominant political message in 2021. It was first highlighted in January, when Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of state broadcaster RT, called “Mother Russia, take Donbas back home! during an “Integration Forum” labeled “Russian Donbass” in Donetsk.³ That forum also saw the publication of a “Russian Donbass Doctrine”, a 30-page pamphlet which argues that the population of Donbas is an “inseparable part of the Russian people” and calls for the destruction of the present Ukrainian state and the unification of all Russian-speaking areas outside of Russia with the Russian state.⁴

While no unification/annexation followed, the participation of some 200,000 – according to Ukrainian figures 230,000 - local Russian passport holders in the September Duma elections was hailed by Moscow and the separatists as another breakthrough - and condemned by Ukraine as a serious breach of international law.⁵

The three-day vote took place from 17 to 19 September and was carried out largely online, but officials boasted that almost 50,000 Russian passport holders were bused to the neighbouring Rostov region to cast their ballot. While there were no ballot stations inside the “People’s Republics”, the separatists set up “information centers” offering help for elderly and other voters facing difficulties logging into Russia’s online voting system. Reports in Ukrainian media and anonymous Telegram channels suggested that authorities pressured employers to make their staff participate in the elections.

Russian election law stipulates that citizens living abroad may vote only in Russian consular representations, but the voting was made possible via a special decree by the Central Election Commission, which allows “distant voting” in seven Russian regions, including Rostov and Moscow. While officials claimed that this was an experiment to allow more Russians abroad to participate in elections, independent observers criticized that Russia’s online voting system is simply a tool to massively widen election falsifications – a fact that was seemingly proven in the city of Moscow, where online results contrasted starkly with results from ballot stations, which had shown strong numbers for the opposition (see Newsletters 94, 95 and 91).

The Donbas Duma vote – symbolism with little impact

While the majority of Russian passport-holders most likely voted for the United Russia party, their votes were hardly necessary to ensure the Kremlin-backed party’s win in an election marred by an unprecedented crackdown against the opposition and independent media. According to official results, United Russia got 51.59 per cent of the party list votes in Rostov – only slightly more than its overall 49.8 per cent, which gave the party a constitutional majority of 324 of 450 Duma seats.⁶ The only visible result for Donbas was the election of Alexander Borodai, who served as “DNR” Prime Minister in 2014 and heads the Union of Donbas Volunteers.

The Ukrainian parliament passed a resolution calling the vote illegitimate.⁷

In a sign that the Kremlin was interested in the Donbas vote more than in the actual voters themselves, access to Russian state social services was restricted again two months after the elections: Since 15 November, Russian passport holders in the “People’s Republics” can no longer obtain Russian insurance policy numbers (known by the Russian acronym SNILS) – a mandatory requirement for most social payments.⁸ Before the September elections, separatist authorities had massively campaigned for the obtainment of SNILS, because it is also a requirement for voting online.

The Duma elections also served as a pretext for United Russia holding campaign rallies in Donetsk and Luhansk, i.e. on Ukrainian territory, where the party also began to recruit members among newly minted Russian citizens. Speaking at such a rally in July, Duma deputy and former Russian sanitary watchdog head Gennady Onishchenko referred to President Putin’s 12 July essay about the history of Ukraine: “The main idea is that White, Little and Great Rus’ are one people, genetically and culturally,” he said, using the tsarist term “Little” (Russia) for Ukraine, which many modern-day Ukrainians find offensive (see Newsletter 91). In December, separatist leaders publicly announced that they had become party members.

Tellingly, the other Duma parties, which tend to promote even more nationalistic policies than United Russia, were practically excluded from publicity during the campaign. Nationalist writer and former “DNR” field commander Zakhar Prilepin did win a Duma mandate for the A Just Russia party – but turned it down.⁹

Almost a third of the population holds Russian Passports

The issuing of Russian passports to local inhabitants continued unabatedly. The “DNR” said on 27 January 2022 that 365,000 passports have been issued by then – meaning that about 80,000 were issued in the six months since July 2021, when the number stood at above 282,000.¹⁰ The “LNR” said last in June that more than 250,000 passports had been issued to its inhabitants – meaning that the combined number must be well above 600,000.¹¹ Rostov governor Vasily Golubev said on the same day that more than 720,000 Russian passports had been issued to inhabitants of Donbas in his region, but it was not clear, if this number included Ukrainians from government-controlled areas, who are also eligible.¹²

The presence of 600,000 or 700,000 Russian citizens – almost a third of the estimated real population (see *demographics*) – means, that all efforts for future reintegration with Ukraine, the Minsk Agreement’s key principle, will be much harder than thought.

Ukraine, her western allies and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have condemned Russia’s passport campaign as violating the Minsk Agreement and international law. Ukrainian Ombudswoman Lyudmyla Denisova stressed in September that holders of Russian passport issued to inhabitants of Donbas and annexed Crimea – then more than 2 million – all remain Ukrainian citizens. Denisova argued that there were many signs that public sector workers like doctors and teachers risk losing their jobs if they do not take Russian passports and vote in the Duma elections.¹³

Copetition between Donetsk and Luhansk

While United Russia’s campaigning and the elections’ organization were heavily scripted by Moscow, rivalry and even mistrust between Donetsk and Luhansk became very visible on other occasions. After the introduction of a customs union between them in September – clearly a decision taken in Moscow – separatist leaders faced questions why the “Republics” did not want to unite. “LNR” leader Leonid Pasechnik bluntly claimed in October that competition over the leadership of Donbas has proven the best solution for the region over the past 100 years.¹⁴

Rivalry was probably also to blame when delegations from both “Republics” visited Syria and South Ossetia in September and neither mentioned the other one in official media (see Newsletter 95). Last but not least, the “DNR” kept its “border” with the “LNR” shut for much of the year, using the pretty unconvincing pretext that

COVID-infections could spread from Ukraine via the open footbridge in Stanytsia Luhanska.

Whether such rivalry is actively encouraged as a divide-and-rule policy or just tolerated by Moscow is an open question. But the Kremlin clearly has a desire to adhere to the Minsk Agreement, at least in letter, which stipulates to preserve the territorial integrity of Ukraine and its administrative divisions.

Human Rights

Domestically, the “People’s Republics” continued their policy of ruthlessly stifling any dissent by detaining, torturing and sentencing real or suspected spies, enemies or simply critics of the regime. While those with pro-Ukrainian sentiments have been largely silenced, repression focused on those who criticize the separatist regime from a pro-Russian standpoint. Taken together, the “republics” remain among Europe’s most repressive place, rivalled only by Chechnya.¹⁵

Dissidents’ persecution persists

The most high-profile victim, Donetsk-based blogger and political scientist Roman Manekin, was apparently sentenced to 2.5 years in prison for “justifying terrorism” on 31 May. However, the court hearings were held in secret and all available information was leaked on anonymous Telegram channels. Manekin, a prominent pro-Moscow activist and Russian citizen, had been a long-standing critic of Pushilin and other prominent separatists. His abduction in December 2020 and ensuing detention has been called the “DNR” leader’s personal revenge (see Newsletter 89).

Arbitrary detentions, abductions and torture in official and unofficial prisons and detention centers are believed to be widespread in both “People’s Republics”. The agencies responsible for this, the State Security “Ministries” in Donetsk and Luhansk, known by their Russian acronym MGB, act in almost complete impunity and secrecy. They are believed to be under the direct control of Russia’s Federal Security Service FSB.

As of July, an estimated 300-400 conflict-related detainees were being held by them, according to the annual report by the US group Human Rights Watch (HRW).¹⁶ In January 2022 Ukrainian Ombudswoman Denisova said that the number of political prisoners in the “People’s Re-

publics” stood at 314. Among them were 33 women and 44 captured Ukrainian soldiers, the Ombudswoman said.¹⁷

Women’s precarious situation

The precarious situation of women as also highlighted in the HRW report, which said that women have been disproportionately impacted by the conflict, in part because of limited and poor-quality options for maternal and other sexual and reproductive healthcare, and traditional gender roles that leave women with little time and few resources to prioritize and address their own health. The UN Human Rights Mission to Ukraine (OHCHR) said in a report released in September that the “intermingling of armed actors with the civilian population” and the proliferation of weapons led to “increased gender-based violence, including domestic violence”. As examples, the OHCHR report lists instances, where men detonated hand grenades after threatening their wives and children.¹⁸

Ombudswoman Denisova highlighted the plight of women detained by the separatists. In December she said that at least five of them are in poor health and urgently need medication. One of the victims, Natalya Shilo, was detained while she was in Horlivka to see after her sick mother. In January, Shilo was shown on a local TV report that alleged that she had been spying for Ukraine. Another, Olga Mozolevskaya, a restaurant manager, has been detained and apparently tortured for unknown reasons since her abduction in October 2017. And dermatologist Natalya Statsenko was in critical health, her family and friends said in December. Statsenko was detained in 2019, apparently for having exchanged messages with journalist Stanislav Aseyev, who was released after being tortured and detained for more than two years in the infamous Izolatsia prison in Donetsk.¹⁹

Separatist border closures hit elderly residents

Another ongoing severe restriction is the separatist-imposed closure of the Line of Contact, which – among other things - makes it impossible for many elderly residents to pick up pensions and other state payments in government-held areas. The “DNR” closed three of its four crossing points completely and opened the fourth (Olenivka/Novotroitske) only for previously approved persons with “DNR” residency for two days a week (Mondays and Fridays).

The “LNR” imposed similar restrictions at its only crossing point – the pedestrian bridge at Stanytsia Luhanska, including a limitation of one crossing per month per person. The Luhansk separatists also continued to obstruct the opening of the two much-needed additional crossing

points in Shchastia and Zolote, whose opening had been agreed in December 2019. In addition, the “DNR” used the COVID-pandemic as a pretext to keep its “border” with the “LNR” closed – until border posts were dismantled for the “economic union” between both “Republics” in October (see Newsletter 95).

As a result, the number of monthly crossings in the first half of 2021 remained at 59,000 on average per month, 95 per cent lower than in 2019, when 1.1 million monthly crossings were recorded, according to the UN Human Rights Mission to Ukraine (OHCHR). Residents were forced to take a 1,000-kilometre detour through Russia, travelling up to 30 hours and risking fines by Ukrainian border guards for crossing the border illegally.²⁰

Society

The COVID catastrophe

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the “People’s Republics” hard for a second year, exacerbating the already serious demographic decline. An underfunded health sector, severe shortages of medical staff, an overaged population, acute vaccine shortages and widespread vaccine skepticism made for colossal regional death tolls – which may be among the world’s highest.

By 31 December the “DNR” had reported a total of 119,002 infections and 9,281 deaths since the pandemic’s beginning – 103,684 more infections and 7,903 more deaths than 12 months earlier.²¹ Based on the official population of 2.2 million, that would amount to 4,218 accumulated deaths per million inhabitants. Because of large-scale exodus since 2014, the real population is believed to be somewhere between 1.5 and 1.2 million, which would mean a death toll of between 6,200 and 8,400 per million – higher than the 6,000 of Peru, the world’s hardest hit country.²²

While the “DNR” health “ministry” reported relatively credible numbers and even communicated everyday positive rates of between 20 and 40 per cent (a clear indication of massive test shortages), the “LNR” reported dubiously low numbers. The Luhansk separatists’ total toll as of 30 December was just 21,479 infections and 3,066 deaths – 19,397 infections and 2,892 deaths over 12 months – less than 20 per cent of the “DNR” infection figures and just a third of the death figures.²³ With officially 1.4 million inhabitants, the “LNR” population is

about 60 per cent of the size of the “DNR”, which officially has 2.2 million inhabitants.

COVID killed more people than the entire war

However, the massive death toll can be discerned from both Republics’ official statistics. According to them, the “LNR” shrank by some 14,000 people in 2019 and 2020. In 2021, however, it suddenly “lost” almost 24,000 inhabitants – 10,000 more than in the previous two years and more than three times the official COVID death toll.²⁴ The “DNR” population decline officially jumped to 33,000 inhabitants in 2021, at least 12,000 more than in 2020 and 2019, when the decline stood at 21,000 and 19,000 respectively.²⁵

These figures include both deaths and emigration, but their sudden jump in 2021 are clear indicators that COVID killed many more than the official death toll suggests and also more people than were killed in the entire war since 2014.

Both “DNR” and “LNR” campaigned for vaccinations, but they were hampered by the fact that Russia first sent insufficient amounts of its Sputnik V vaccine and later only delivered “Sputnik light” to Donetsk and Luhansk, which is basically the first component of Sputnik and is of doubtful effectiveness, especially against the more deadly Delta variant. Also, there are no reasons to believe that vaccine skepticism is less rampant than in Ukraine and Russia. By autumn, less than 20 per cent of the local population was believed to have been vaccinated (see Newsletters 98 and 96).

Dire demographic predictions

Even without the coronavirus pandemic, local demographics are looking bleak. In October, former Donetsk health “minister” Olga Dolgoshapko said that the “DNR” currently had a negative rate of natural population increase of minus 11.9, meaning that the population decline is more than double than Bulgaria’s -5.8, Europe’s worst. If this rate continues, the “DNR” would be completely depopulated in 95 years, Dolgoshapko said (see Newsletter 96).

The true population figures are impossible to gauge. The separatists never released the results of a census carried in 2019, probably because of fears that they would have to acknowledge massive depopulation. An imperfect workaround is calculating the population based on birth figures, which displayed a steady decline: The “DNR”

reported some 8,000 births in 2021, more than 2,500 less than in 2018, when 10,655 births were reported.²⁶ The “LNR” reported 5,007 births in 2021, about 1,500 less than 2018 (6,487).²⁷

A multiplication of births with the birth rate suggests that the “Republics” have a joint population of 1.9 million – almost half the official figure of 3.6 million, which is based on pre-2014 data. In 2019, the “DNR” reported 9,577 births. Assuming a local birth rate of 8.1 like in Ukraine that year, this translates into 1.18 million people. The “LNR”, which reported 6,000 births in 2019, winds up with 740,000 inhabitants.²⁸

However, the fact that the resident population is overwhelmingly elderly because it is mostly able-bodied people of working age who are leaving suggests that the real population is a little higher, perhaps above 2 million.

The Economy

Brain drain getting worse

The ongoing brain drain had strong effects on the economy. Separatist officials regularly complained that severe shortages of trained and able-bodied staff were hampering key economic sectors. Worst hit in 2021 was probably the health sector, where underpaid doctors and nurses struggled under the massive onslaught of the COVID-pandemic. Deputy labour “minister” Denis Strelchenko said in November that the “DNR” was missing 2,154 health workers – including 1,200 doctors. He added that labour shortages were also serious in the construction and metals sectors and for public transport (Newsletter 97).

Another driver of the brain drain is Moscow’s passport campaign which enables people to find employment in Russia easier than before. For the Kremlin, this is a formidable dilemma: On the one hand, it can remedy labour shortages at home by attracting well-educated Russian-speakers, on the other hand, these people are lost for Donbas, exacerbating economic doom and the need for further subsidies there.

The demise of Vneshtorgservis

However, 2021 saw two big steps towards more economic integration with Russia. In the summer, a new Russian “investor” was presented as the owner of the key industrial

assets that had been managed by the secretive Vneshtorgservis holding since 2017. The eight plants were re-grouped into a holding called *Yuzhny gorno-metallichesky complex* (Southern Mining and Metals Complex) – known by its Russian acronym as YuGMK. The term “southern” is another indication of more Russian control, because Donbas is geographically south of Moscow. In autumn, the Kremlin announced the lifting of all trade barriers with the “Republics”, effectively making them equal to other Russian regions.

While their effectiveness remains to be seen, these steps certainly present a shift to more pragmatic policies that aim to eliminate corruption-prone inefficient customs bureaucracies and ultimately reduce Russia’s financial burden. This is probably the handwriting of Dmitry Kozak, a deputy head of the presidential administration who became the Kremlin’s new point man for Ukraine after the ouster of the highly ideological Vladislav Surkov in early 2020.

The elimination of Vneshtorgservis was an open admission that the secretive holding had not lived up to its promises, kept up to 20,000 workers unpaid while fostering only more corruption and enriching dubious middlemen. Registered in the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia, Vneshtorgservis had been running the biggest metals plants and coal mines that were seized from their Ukrainian private owners in 2017. Its key benefactor was believed to be Serhiy Kurchenko, a fugitive Ukrainian businessman close to former President Viktor Yanukovich, with whom he is believed to be hiding in Russia. Vneshtorgservis sold coal and steel to Russia, where they were re-registered as Russian and re-exported to third countries, including Ukraine. But despite generous tax-breaks and an export monopoly, the holding did not live up to expectations.

Yurchenko replaces Kurchenko

Not only did the holding’s non-payment of wages lead to social unrest, it also made workers seek better paid work elsewhere, exacerbating the region’s labour crisis. And the Kurchenko connection prompted criticism that the Kremlin was selling out Donbas to former Ukrainian elites.

The end of Vneshtorgservis was sealed on 11 November, when deputy “DNR” prime minister Vladimir Pashkov was removed without official explanation. Pashkov, a Russian citizen and former deputy governor of the Siberian Irkutsk region, had been Vneshtorgservis CEO before being promoted into the “government” in 2019, where he oversaw the economy. There was no replacement for him (see Newsletter 97). However, the secretive “Prime Min-

ister” Alexander Ananchenko remained in office, despite the fact that he too has been linked to Vneshtorgservis.

The new investor, Yevgeny Yurchenko, bears all the hallmarks of a Kremlin stooge, having no prior experience in the metals or mining sectors nor apparently sufficient assets to fulfil his rosy promises himself (see Newsletter 90). Among other things, Yurchenko announced the restart of the huge metals plants in Yenakiiv and Alchevsk, and to raise wages to the levels of the neighbouring Russian region of Rostov – echoing separatist leaders, who have promised to raise state-sector wages and pensions to those levels by 2024 (see Newsletter 95).²⁹

However, Yenakiiv plant manager Sergei Tkachenko said in December that one steel mill would go into full mode to produce 13,000 tons p month -or 155,500 tons per year – only a small fraction of pre-war levels, when the plant, known by its Russian acronym EMZ produced more than 1 million tons of steel annually.³⁰

Economic figures shrouded in secrecy

The seriousness of the industrial decline is difficult to assess as the “Republics” continued to raise levels of secrecy in all spheres. The “DNR” announced in July that it wants to classify most statistical data, arguing that it could be used as a weapon in the ongoing “information warfare” if used by the wrong people. Even the Russian state propaganda outlet ukraina.ru admitted in November that coal production figures are now more or less completely secret.³¹

According to data collected by the anonymous Ukrainian blogger “Jose Pinochet”, coal production in the Makeevugol mines in Makiivka, a city adjacent to Donetsk, amounted to some 600,000 tons in 2021 – a fraction of the potential listed on the mines’ website, which adds up to well over 2 million tons.³²

The same blogger also highlighted an analysis published from the Donetsk-based Economic Research Institute, according to which the “DNR” has accumulated a trade deficit of 70.5 billion roubles (800 million Euros) in 2020. Metals production fell drastically from 102 billion roubles in 2018 to 7.1 billion in 2020, according to these figures. “Russia treats Donbas like a colonial power seeking to exploit (local) resources”, he concludes.³³

Experts try to stave off ecological catastrophe

The economic depression also continued to exacerbate the environmental dangers emanating from closed coalmines. Some of the deep and relatively old mines

were flooded with water after pumping systems to keep them dry were switched off. As a result, ground water has been contaminated with toxic metals and chemical and radioactive waste, disposed there in Soviet times. The significant dangers emanating from this have been collected in a study by the Britain-based Conflict and Environment Observatory in 2020.³⁴

In a glimmer of hope, the Trilateral Contact Group, which consists of Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, dispatched a group of engineers from Ukraine, Germany and the “People’s Republics” to assess the dangers. Their mission began in autumn 2021 and will publish results in the spring of 2022, according to a report by the Russian online outlet Spektr.press, whose reporter accompanied the experts.³⁵

Security

Ceasefire violations and casualty figures rise

The year 2021 was marked by a gradual deterioration of the additional ceasefire agreement reached in July 2020. According to OSCE figures quoted by the UN Human Rights Mission to Ukraine (OHCHR), the number of ceasefire violations between 1 February and 31 July 2021 was 369 per cent higher than during the preceding six months from 1 August 2020 to 31 January 2021 (39,806 and 8,484, respectively).³⁶

As a result, military casualty figures rose on both sides. According to a count by Ukrainian TV station “24 Kanal”, 84 Ukrainian soldiers were killed in action during 2021 – more than 50 per cent more than in 2020, when the figure was 50.³⁷ The “DNR” also reported an uptick in military casualties. According to “Ombudswoman” Daria Morozova, 70 “DNR” servicemen were killed and 97 were injured in 2021 – significantly more than the 47 killed in the year before.³⁸

As in previous years, the “LNR” did not report casualty figures at all. However, Luhansk separatist leader Leonid Pasechnik claimed in October that Ukraine was responsible for 9,000 of the 14,000 people killed since 2014 – and that 4,000 of them were killed in the “LNR” and 5,000 in the “DNR”.³⁹ That claim does not add up with the UN casualty estimates. In 2020, when the OHCHR released its last figures, it said that of the 13,000-13,200 killed, at least 3,350 were civilians, an estimated 4,100 Ukrainian forces and an estimated 5,650 members of armed groups – i.e.

for Pasechnik’s claim to be true, all civilian deaths would have to be ascribed to the “People’s Republics”.⁴⁰

The number of civilian deaths was slightly lower than in 2020. OHCHR Mission recorded 94 civilian casualties between February and November 2021 – 19 killed and 75 injured.⁴¹ The OSCE Mission confirmed 16 civilian deaths and 72 injuries between 1 January and 12 December – as opposed to 23 deaths and 105 injuries in the year 2020.⁴² Most of the civilian casualties resulted from mine-related incidents and the handling of explosive remnants of war.

Ukrainian drone attack triggers calls for Russian BUKs

While the basic military status quo – the sides holding dug-in positions without violating the contact line – remained unchanged, two incidents in October served as reminder that this stability can break down quickly. On 25 October, Ukraine apparently destroyed a Russian howitzer in the “DNR” with a guided missile launched from a Bayraktar TB2-drone. While Kyiv argued that it did not violate the (additional) ceasefire and that the howitzer’s presence was a violation, France and Germany warned that such attacks could cause escalation (see Newsletter 96).

The “DNR” did not confirm the attack, but separatist-controlled media later quoted military experts as saying that in order to prevent combat drone attacks Russia should deliver anti-aircraft weapons like the “Tunguzka” and “Buk” systems – the latter of which was infamously used in 2014 to shoot down a Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 east of Donetsk, killing 298 people.⁴³

Also on 25 October, Ukrainian soldiers reportedly entered Staromariivka, a small village east of the river Kalmius – triggering accusations from the separatists that government troops had crossed into the “DNR”. While the Contact Line in this area south of Donetsk is identical with the river, the village is considered to be in the “grey zone” because it is controlled by no one – “DNR” military positions are located well east of it (see Newsletter 96).

As in the past years, the separatists, whose armed formations (“people’s militias”) are believed to be Russian-commanded but inferior in strength and equipment to the Ukrainian government forces stationed along the contact line, did not launch any meaningful military offensives. They did, however, draft recruits for the first time since 2014 – although the numbers of people called up in April (200 each) and August (1,000 in the “LNR”) were relatively small (see Newsletters 87 and 93). The overall number of the separatist armed formations actually went down in

the past years - Ukrainian commander Serhiy Nayev in May put their number at 28,000 – 4,000 less than Nayev's own estimate in 2018.⁴⁴

The fact that Russia supplies and actually feeds the separatist armed formations was proven in November, when a court in Rostov-on-Don published a verdict against a local contractor who had accepted bribes to win a contract to provide "units of the Russian Armed Forces stationed (in the) DNR and LNR" (see Newsletter 98).

separatists also repeatedly harassed and seriously restricted the OSCE's Monitoring Mission. In October, activists blocked the international monitors in their hotel in Donetsk for eight days, effectively preventing them from doing their work. The "DNR" unconvincingly claimed that they were protesting against the detention of an "LNR" fighter by Ukrainian soldiers and accused the mission of doing nothing against this – but did not explain why no such protests took place in the "LNR" (see Newsletter 96).

One month later, the "LNR" imposed sanctions against the mission by banning it from crossing the Contact Line, which seriously impeded its work in the entire Luhansk region. This policy – which was never officially confirmed or explained - continued well into 2022, although the separatists did allow mission members to cross the pedestrian bridge in Stanytsia Luhanska.⁴⁵

Russia also terminated the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian-Ukrainian border by vetoing its prolongation in September. That little-known mission stationed at the border crossings from Russia into non-government-held areas of the Luhansk region at Gukovo and the Russian town of Donetsk had operated under severe restrictions imposed by Moscow, but during its seven years of existence provided a wealth of information about suspicious movements – including people in military clothing, tanker trucks and funeral vans.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The year 2021 brought no developments inside the “People’s Republics” that could help their reintegration into Ukraine. On the contrary, the Kremlin and their separatist proxies increased their efforts to further integrate them with Russia politically and economically. Moscow, which controls almost all levers of power in these areas, continued its policy of de-facto annexation by issuing more Russian passports, holding Duma elections and bringing key industrial plants under its direct control. Existing links with Ukraine proper were further strained by the ongoing closure of the Contact Line, which massively reduced people-to-people contacts.

Furthermore, the presentation of the so-called Russian Donbas Doctrine, which openly calls for the destruction of the present Ukrainian state and the unification of Russian-speaking areas with the Russian state, introduced Russian nationalist and irredentist ideology in a scale previously unseen into the local propagandistic discourse. Separatist leaders said that the doctrine should become the ideological basis for the “People’s Republics” and “DNR” leader Pushilin has announced that parts of it will be adopted into local law in 2022.⁴⁷

The ever-strengthening entrenchment of two quasi-states inside Ukraine with Russian citizens, direct Russian economic and military control, relentless anti-Ukrainian propaganda and an elaborate ideology hostile to the Ukrainian state presented colossal challenges to any attempt of reintegration. The economic restructuring initiated by the Kremlin also diminishes previous hopes that the growing financial burden might prompt a Russian rethinking. Instead, Moscow has shown its determination to keep the “People’s Republics” under tight control – even if that means more migration of skilled labour to Russia at the latters’ expense.”

Endnotes

- 1 This report quotes the regular Newsletters published as part of the “Civic Monitoring” project throughout the year. Instead of additional endnotes, each Newsletter’s number is given. Readers should open the category Newsletter at <https://civicmonitoring.org/> and navigate by changing the numbers in the URL, eg <https://civicmonitoring.org/newsletter83/>
- 2 <https://dan-news.info/official/novogodnee-obraschenie-glavy-dnr-denisapushilina/>
- 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aFnLJeKfY>
- 4 <https://russian-center.ru/8315-2/>
- 5 <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/316023-denisova-okolo-380-tysyach-zhitelej-ordlo-progolosovali-na-vyborah-v-gosdumu-rossii>
- 6 Voters without local residency — those from “DNR” and “LNR” — could only vote for party lists. <http://www.rostov.izbirkom.ru/arkhiv-vyborov-i-referendumov/federalnye-vybory/vybory-deputatov-gd-fs-rf-2021/13775/>
- 7 <https://www.rada.gov.ua/news/Novyny/214065.html>
- 8 <https://novosti.dn.ua/article/7908-rossijskie-sotsyplaty-v-ordlo-obeshhaniya-i-realnost>
- 9 <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/09/24/prilepin/>
- 10 <https://dan-news.info/russia/rossijskie-pasporta-poluchili-365-tys.-zhitelej-dnr/> and <https://dan-news.info/russia/svyshe-282-000-zhitelej-dnr-poluchili-grazhdanstvo-rf-v-uproshhenom-porjadke/>
- 11 <https://lug-info.com/ru/news/bole-250-tys-zhitelej-respubliki-poluchili-grazhdanstvo-rf-v-uproshhenom-poryadke-pasechnik>
- 12 <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/319767-bole-720-tysyach-zhitelej-ordlo-poluchili-rossijskie-pasporta>
- 13 <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/315729-zhiteli-ordlo-i-kryma-s-rossijskimi-pasportami-ostalis-grazhdanami-ukrainy-denisova>
- 14 <https://iz.ru/1234255/2021-10-12/v-lnr-obiasnili-otkaz-ot-idei-obedineniya-s-dnr>
- 15 See the author’s reports for Freedom House about Eastern Donbas <https://freedomhouse.org/country/eastern-donbas>
- 16 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/ukraine>
- 17 <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/319810-v-rossii-i-ordlo-uderzhivayut-444-ukrainskih-politizaklyuchennyh-i-zalozhnikov-denisova>
- 18 <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/32ndReportUkraine-en.pdf>
- 19 Shilo: <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/319210-kanal-dnr-pokazal-odnu-iz-plennits-kotoruyu-obvinyayut-v-shpionazhe-Mozolevska>: <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/319361-denisova-v-plenu-dnr-nahoditsya-devushka-kotoroj-nuzhna-medpomoshh-Statsenko>: <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/318455-odna-iz-plennits-dnr-v-kriticheskoy-sostoyanii-ey-srochno-trebuetsya-operatsiya-pravozashchitniki>
- 20 See III B1: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/32ndReportUkraine-en.pdf>
- 21 <https://mzdnr.ru/news/covid-vsego-po-sostoyaniyu-na-0900-31-dekabrya-inficirovannyh-covid-19-na-territorii-dnr-119002> and <https://mzdnr.ru/news/po-sostoyaniyu-na-1000-31-dekabrya-vsego-15-318-zaregistrirovannyh-i-podtverzhennyh-sluchaev>
- 22 https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?zoomToSelection=true&time=2020-03-01.latest&facet=none&pickerSort=desc&pickerMetric=new_cases_per_million&Metric=Confirmed+deaths&Interval=Cumulative&Relative+to+Population=true&Color+by+test+positivity=false&country=IND~USA~GBR~DEU~JPN~DNK~PRT~ISL~NLD~BEL~FRA~BGR~UKR~RUS~GEO~BIH~HRV~PER
- 23 <https://mzlnr.su/2021/12/30/vsego-po-sostoyaniyu-na-0900-30-dekabrya/> and <https://mzlnr.su/2020/12/30/mediki-za-sutki-zaregistrirovali-v-lnr-dva-letalnyh-sluchaya-ot-covid-19-19/>
- 24 The exact figures are -23,976 in 2021, -14,768 in 2020 and -13,989 in 2019: https://gkslnr.su/stat_info/kratie-itogi/paschetnay-chislenost-naseleniya/
- 25 The exact figures are -33,109 in 2021, -20,897 in 2020, -19,460 in 2019: <http://gosstat-dnr.ru/>
- 26 <https://dan-news.info/obschestvo/naskolko-aktivno-zhiteli-dnr-sozdajut-semii-kakaja-situacija-s-rozhdaemostju/>
- 27 <https://lug-info.com/news/zagsy-lnr-v-2021-godu-zaregistrirovali-5-007-rozdenij-detej-minut>
- 28 World Bank data on birth rates: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CBRT.IN?locations=UA>
- 29 <https://dnronline.su/do-konca-goda-na-predpriyatiyah-jugmk-my-povysim-zarplatu-na-30-evgenij-jurchenko/>
- 30 <https://emz.metinvestholding.com/en/about/structure>
- 31 <https://dnronline.su/pravitelstvo-iniciiruet-ogranichenie-predostavleniya-statisticheskoy-informacii/> and <https://ukraina.ru/news/20211103/1032589953.html>
- 32 https://twitter.com/Jose_Pinoche/status/1470785118923018247 and <http://www.makeevugol.donbass.com/products.html>
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- 34 <https://ceobs.org/abandoned-mines-are-flooding-in-ukraines-donbass-region/>
- 35 <https://spektr.press/kak-ekologicheskaya-katastrofa-na-donbasse-dopekla-uchenyh-iz-kieva-moskvy-luganska-i-donecka-do-gibridnogo-sotrudnichestva/>
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- 37 https://24tv.ua/skilki-zaginulo-na-donbasi-2021-kilkist-zhertv_n1498581
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- 41 Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 1 February to 31 July 2021 and Update on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 1 August to 31 October 2021: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/ENACARRegion/Pages/UARports.aspx>
- 42 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/6/508319.pdf>
- 43 <https://dan-news.info/russia/rossijskij-ekspert-rasskazal-kak-ustroit-bespoletnuju-zonu-nad-ukrainoj-s/>
- 44 <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/311780-naev-nazval-tekushchuyu-chislenost-boevikov-dnr-i-lnr-2021> and <https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/555933.html> (2018)
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- 47 Pushilin announced this in his annual address to “parliament” in December <https://dan-news.info/politics/gosstroitelstvo-dnr-kak-russkogo-nacionalnogo-gosudarstva-zakrepat/>

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/>
- Kanal Dom <https://kanal-dom.tv/> Ukraine's Russian-language state broadcaster for Donbass and Crimea.

Media from the "DNR"

- Donetskoe Agentstvo Novostei (DAN) <http://dan-news.info/> The official "DNR" news site, close to separatist leader Pushilin. Reliable, but publishes only a highly restrictive range of officially-sanctioned news.
- "Official site of the People's Republic" <https://dnronline.su/> Run by the Information "Ministry" and publishes official information and decrees.
- Website of Denis Pushilin <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 has been under separatist control since 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 Tsentr (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.

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.
- Izvestia <https://iz.ru/> A pro-Kremlin broadsheet newspaper.
- Novaya Gazeta: 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.
- Spektr.press an independent online outlet with occasional reports from the "People's Republics"

International Media

- Donbas.Realii <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/p/4986.html> A project of US broadcaster Radio Liberty devoted to news and analysis from Donbas
- Meduza <https://meduza.io/> A Latvia-based news website strongly critical of the Kremlin

The year 2021 brought no developments inside the “People’s Republics” that could help their reintegration into Ukraine. On the contrary, the Kremlin and their separatist proxies increased their efforts to further integrate them with Russia politically and economically. Moscow, which controls almost all levers of power in these areas, continued its policy of de-facto annexation by issuing more Russian passports, holding Duma elections and bringing key industrial plants under its direct control. Existing links with Ukraine proper were further strained by the ongoing closure of the Contact Line, which massively reduced people-to-people contacts.

Furthermore, the presentation of the so-called Russian Donbas Doctrine, which openly calls for the destruction of the present Ukrainian state and the unification of Russian-speaking areas with the Russian state, introduced Russian nationalist and irredentist ideology in a scale previously unseen into the local propagandistic discourse. Separatist leaders said that the doctrine should become the ideological basis for the “People’s Republics” and “DNR” leader Pushilin has announced that parts of it will be adopted into local law in 2022.

The ever-strengthening entrenchment of two quasi-states inside Ukraine with Russian citizens, direct Russian economic and military control, relentless anti-Ukrainian propaganda and an elaborate ideology hostile to the Ukrainian state presented colossal challenges to any attempt of reintegration. The economic restructuring initiated by the Kremlin also diminishes previous hopes that the growing financial burden might prompt a Russian rethinking. Instead, Moscow has shown its determination to keep the “People’s Republics” under tight control – even if that means more migration of skilled labour to Russia at the latters’ expense.

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