



War and Annexation

The “People’s Republics” of eastern Ukraine in 2022 Annual Report

Nikolaus von Twickel

Imprint

Austausch e. V.
Badstraße 44
D-13357 Berlin
Tel. +49 (0)30 446 680 12

info@austausch.org
www.austausch.org
www.civicmonitoring.org

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Author of the report: Nikolaus von Twickel
Editor: Tim Bohse

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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 Special Monitoring Mission in Donetsk. Since 2016 he publishes newsletters on political events in the “People’s Republics” on civicmonitoring.org.

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.

Austausch e.V. is a Berlin-based non-profit organization that focuses on international civil society cooperation, democracy promotion and youth exchange. Established in 1992 as the German-Russian Exchange (DRA), the organisation 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

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine coincided with the end of the "People's Republics" in the form that they had existed since 2014 – covert Russian protectorates outside Moscow's official jurisdiction. Their key role in the run-up to the invasion made obvious what they were established for in the first place.

During the past eight years, the "People's Republics" had been a conundrum for European Security: While Ukraine and her allies were locked in seemingly endless negotiations over the Minsk agreement, Russia installed criminal networks to act with almost complete impunity against dissent and to pilfer local economic assets, as long as the benefactors remained quiet. If it felt that these networks were too powerful or working against each other, Moscow intervened, like during the Luhansk Putsch of 2017 and the assassination of "DNR" leader Alexander Zakharchenko in 2018.

While this approach ruined the local economy and corrupted local elites, it rewarded the Kremlin with a valuable asset: Almost eight years of war instigated by Russia, relentless poisonous propaganda and hate speech about Kyiv's "genocide" against the Russian-speaking population in Donbas set the tone and planted the narratives for the much bigger invasion of 2022, misnamed a "special military operation" in aid of Donbas.

In the run-up to 24 February, the "People's Republics" became the pretext for Russia's war of aggression: After Moscow suggested that Ukraine was about to retake Donbas, it orchestrated mass evacuations on 18 February and the recognition of the "Peoples Republics" as independent on 21 February.

The general mobilization announced on 19 February turned the "People's Republics" into a big reservoir for Russia's invasion force – where much of the male population could be mobilized while losses had little resonance in Russia proper.

In September 2022, both "republics" were officially annexed along with the occupied Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, albeit Russia only controlled parts of them. While the annexation decision clearly made under the duress of Ukraine's military successes, preparations in Donetsk and Luhansk had been ongoing for months: Already in June Moscow began packing local ministries with technocrats from Russia. The implementation of annexation was gradual, with even "foreign ministries" operating for the time being.

This and the ongoing war also prevented any meaningful insights into if and how the unmaking of the quasi-statehood of the "People's Republics" will affect local political elites. In fact, the war made the future of all annexed Ukrainian territories, including Crimea, appear highly volatile, and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has unmistakably demanded the de-occupation of Donbas and Crimea as conditions to end it.¹

If the past eight years for Russian-controlled Donbas were bad, the year 2022 marked a turn towards catastrophic. The war showed again that Moscow has little interest in Donbas itself and just exploits the region for bigger ends vis-à-vis Ukraine. This was the case between 2015 and 2021, when it served as a spoiler for Kyiv's hopes to integrate with the West, and even more so in 2022, when much of the male population was sacrificed as cannon fodder.

This report quotes the regular Newsletters published as part of the "Civic Monitoring" project throughout the year without additional endnotes.

For updates follow the newsletter on civicmonitoring.org

Politics

The “People’s Republics” have been championing “integration with Russia” on and off since 2014, but its leaders always grudgingly referred to the Minsk agreement in order to explain why they actually could not join Russia. However, President Vladimir Putin’s decision to tear up Minsk by recognizing the “republics” as independent and to launch Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, was followed by the replacement of many local officials by new people from Russia.

By the end of the year, the “DNR” boasted 11 Russians in its 27-strong cabinet, including the Prime Minister and five of his nine deputies. Of the 20 ministries, six were led by officials from Russia.² In the “LNR”, the number of Russian appointees was lower – by November, there were nine Russians in the government in Luhansk, including a first deputy Prime Minister, three “ministers” (trade, economic development and education) and four deputy “ministers” (see Newsletter 107). This probably reflected the Kremlin’s long-standing policy of focusing on Donetsk while Luhansk often gets less attention and resources from Moscow.

While the previous administrations of Donetsk and Luhansk were also controlled by Russia, this was much less direct and open. Ministries were usually headed by locals while officials from Moscow would work in the background – either as deputies or without official positions. A typical case are the State Security Ministries, who mastermind the brutal repression system in both “republics” and are widely believed to be controlled by the Russian FSB. The armed formations, officially called “People’s Militias”, were commanded by clandestine Russian officers, while local deputies did most of the public appearances. E.g. “DNR” veteran military spokesman Eduard Basurin officially served as deputy army corps commander.

The appointments of 2022 showed that Moscow felt that more direct control was necessary for the tasks ahead – rebuilding at least some of the destroyed economies and bringing local bureaucracies firmly into President Putin’s power vertical. But they also reflected changes inside the Kremlin, where the responsibility for (civilian) policies in Ukraine passed from Dmitry Kozak to Sergei Kirienko, a first deputy head of the presidential administration, in the spring of 2022.

Many appointments bore Kirienko’s handwriting, like “DNR” Prime Minister Vitaly Khotsenko, who had successfully taken part in the “Leaders of Russia” contest, chaired by Kirienko. Others, like “LNR” energy minister Konstantin Zavizenov and his deputies Ilya Yashin and Pavel Reich,

previously worked for Atomstroyexport, a subsidiary of state nuclear holding Rosatom, which was headed by Kirienko before he moved to the Kremlin in 2016.

Education as a key battlefield

These personnel policies also revealed which positions the Kremlin deems important for its future rule. In the “DNR”, Russians took the helm of the ministries for revenue, construction and economic development, key institutions for rebuilding the war-ravaged economy.

Another prize was education. The respective ministries in both Donetsk and Luhansk got new leaders from Russia, plus another two deputy ministers from Russia in Luhansk. Their job is to fully reorganize schools and universities in accordance with Russian norms. For this, Moscow also sent huge numbers of schoolbooks to the “People’s Republics”, 2.5 million alone to the “DNR” (Newsletter 105). The amount of indoctrination and propaganda involved, especially concerning history, led experts to proclaim that education had become a decisive battlefield in the war.³

Many of the new officials had backgrounds in the ruling United Russia party, which has taken hold in the “People’s Republics” since Russia’s parliamentary elections were held there in 2021 (see Newsletter 94). Typical examples were Alexander Kostomarov, a deputy governor in the Ulyanovsk region before being appointed a first deputy of “DNR” leader Denis Pushilin’s administration, and Vasily Noskov and Ilya Bubnov, both party activists from Siberia, who became deputy youth ministers in Luhansk and Donetsk respectively in June (see Newsletters 103 and 104).

United Russia takes over, followed by other parties

During 2022, United Russia gradually assumed the dominant role played hitherto by the ruling Donetsk Republic and Peace to Luhansk “movements” in the staged two-party systems of the “People’s Republics”. After signing cooperation agreements with both of them before annexation, United Russia opened regional branches afterwards – and elected regional strongmen as party secretaries: Pushilin in Donetsk and parliamentary speaker Denis Miroshnichenko in Luhansk (Newsletter 107). In February 2023, “DNR” parliamentary speaker Vladimir Bidyovka said that he and 30 (of 100) deputies had become members of United Russia.⁴

Russia’s other political parties then also moved into the newly occupied territories. First was the ultranationalist LDPR, which set up branches in Donetsk in November and in Luhansk in December. Tellingly, these were headed

by professed loyalists rather than nationalists – in the “DNR” by Andrei Kramar, who has been a close ally of Pushilin even before 2014, while the “LNR” branch was headed by Peace to Luhansk activist and MP Maxim Uvarov.⁵

Second and most interesting was the Russian Communist Party, which set up shop in December. While the Luhansk branch’s opening was reported by official “LNR” media, no mention of the Donetsk branch opening was made in “DNR” media. Its leader, local Communist veteran Boris Litvinov, has openly sparred with Pushilin and was pushed out of parliament in 2016.⁶

The left-leaning A Just Russia – For Truth party said in February that it set up branches in Donetsk and Luhansk – headed by Duma deputy Yelena Drapenko and local activist Gennady Tarakanov. The only one missing was the quasi-liberal New People party, which promised to set up a Donetsk branch in December but had not done so by February.⁷

Clearly the Kremlin intends to impose Russia’s state-controlled party system on the “People’s Republics” before the elections planned for September 2023 (see below). Whether and how this will change the status quo shaped by eight years of political life has been completely restricted to the fake political “movements” set up in 2014 remains to be seen.

“Referenda” – farcical votes with paradoxical timing

The timing of the “referenda” was paradoxical. The Kremlin had postponed this step a few times, obviously because it wanted complete military and political control of the four Ukrainian regions. But in mid-September it suddenly rushed ahead – despite significant parts of three of the regions remaining under Kyiv’s control. The fact that the announcements for “referenda” were made on 20 September 2022, one day before Putin announced “partial” mobilization in Russia, shows that both were kneejerk reactions to Ukraine’s successful counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region and aimed to secure gains and avert more losses – by scaring Ukraine from advancing further into occupied territories and by enabling the Russian armed forces to fill their depleted ranks (the latter was far more successful than the former).

The ensuing “referenda” were arguably even more farcical than those held in 2014 and the 2018 “elections”. A mere glance at the official turnout (2.1 million in the “DNR” and 1.66 million in the “LNR”) reveals that the number of “counted” ballots was much higher than the real num-

ber of inhabitants (see “Demographics of depopulation” below).⁸ The fact that ballot boxes were carried to apartment blocks and officials publicly displayed their ballots shows that this was just a propagandistic acclamation but hardly a vote.

While the “referenda” were clearly planned in advance, the transfer of officials from Russia points to even earlier planning: At least two of them resigned from their previous posts in Russia as early as 2021: Vladislav Kuznetsov, who became “LNR” first deputy prime minister, left office as a vice-governor in Kurgan in December, while Alexander Kostomarov resigned as a vice-governor in Ulyanovsk back in October 2021 (Newsletter 103).

Sluggish integration despite annexation

The appointments of Russians were usually explained by the (coming) “active integration with Russia and the rebuilding of the economic potential” – but holdovers from the past continued to operate long after annexation. The annexation treaties signed on 30 September in the Kremlin stipulate a transitional period of more than three years until 1 January 2026

Thus, the “foreign ministries” in both Donetsk and Luhansk continued to function as if nothing had happened: In October, “DNR” “Minister” Natalia Nikonorova traveled to Syria and discussed post-annexation cooperation with President Bashar Assad – Syria had recognized the “People’s Republics” as independent on 29 June (Newsletter 107). The “LNR Foreign Ministry” explained in November that it would continue to perform its duties until the Russian Foreign Ministry establishes a local representation in 2023. Wisely enough, it did not mention a decree from “LNR” leader Pasechnik about its own dissolution (Newsletter 108). “DNR” leader Pushilin promised in October that his republic would shorten the transition period – without setting a new timeframe.⁹

A start was made in December, when Nikonorova, who served as “Foreign Minister” since 2016, was made a senator for the “DNR” in Russia’s upper house of parliament. While her former Ministry’s website published few updates since, the “DNR” embassy in Moscow kept churning out social media posts about its activities. “LNR” ambassador to Moscow Rodion Miroshnik had earlier boasted about his workload, even though his embassy was never officially opened.¹⁰

Overall, it was hard to gauge what plan – if any – Moscow has for the political development and integration of the “People’s Republics”. While some key officials from the earlier period were replaced by Russians, their leaders Denis Pushilin and Leonid Pasechnik were kept in charge

– most likely to give a sense of continuity – but with the term “acting” (исполняющий обязанности – и.о.) in front of their job titles. “Elections” were scheduled for September 2023, first apparently for both leaders and regional parliaments, but new constitutions hastily adopted on 30 December scrapped the leaders’ direct elections and replaced them by votes in regional parliaments – a system Russia currently employs in occupied Crimea and most North Caucasian republics.¹¹

Neither Pushilin nor Pasechnik ever stood in meaningful elections. Both were merely confirmed in office by a farcical vote in November 2018, during which the few credible opponents were barred from participation and whose massive falsifications were uncovered by prominent blogger Roman Manekin, who has been imprisoned since 2020 (Newsletter 48).

Joining Russia won't improve freedoms

Any hopes that annexation by Russia will have positive effects on democracy or human rights are illusory. While it is true that Russia ranked slightly better in terms of political freedoms in the past years – the Freedom in the World Index by the US NGO Freedom House gave Russia at 19 out of 100 points in 2021, while “eastern Donbas” had only 4 – the massive fallout from the war and mobilization will probably equal out those differences. Also, parts of the Russian Federation have for years been far more repressive than the rest of the country – e.g. Chechnya and annexed Crimea, which scored just 7 points in 2021.¹²

The meaninglessness even of Russian basic laws and procedures was shown when the “republics” chose their senators to the Federation Council (upper house of Russia’s parliament) in Moscow. Both Donetsk and Luhansk appointed one senator for their parliaments and one for their executives, as stipulated in the Russian constitution. In order to obey the rules on paper, the “LNR” quickly installed its parliamentary candidate Olga Bas – the long-time head of Pasechnik’s administration – as a deputy of its “people’s council”, before sending her to Moscow. The “DNR” appointed former Prime Minister Alexander Ananchenko as its parliamentary Senator, but official media did not even report that he was ever made a parliamentary deputy (Newsletter 108).

Russian citizenship imposed, but two thirds retain Ukrainian passports

With annexation, Russia introduced a similar drastic citizenship regime as in Crimea 2014: Every inhabitant of the “People’s Republics” (and the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson

regions) becomes a Russian citizen by default. According to the annexation treaties, local inhabitants who want to keep Ukrainian citizenship in the eyes of the Russian state had to officially make a declaration within one month – i.e. before 1 November 2022.¹³ There were no available figures of how many – if any – people made such a declaration, but doing so would certainly entail great personal risk. A report published by the Open Society Justice Initiative in 2018 about the situation in Crimea concludes that those who rejected the imposition of Russian citizenship “have been at risk of unlawful expulsion (...) and subjected to discrimination by the de facto authorities, all in gross violation of international humanitarian law and international human rights law”.¹⁴

Under a scheme that critics have called “the annexation of people”, Russia began issuing passports to inhabitants of the “People’s Republics” back in 2019. The number of Russian passport holders increased steadily in the following years, reaching about 630,000 in early 2022. However, the speed of issuing was much faster in Donetsk than in Luhansk. The “DNR” said on 22 December 2022 that 496,500 Russian passports had been issued – 42,000 more than on 30 September, when that number stood at 454,500.¹⁵ This translates to a rate of roughly 14,000 issued per month – significantly higher than in the months before, when the rate stood at 11,000 per month (the last “DNR” figure was 365,000 in January 2022 – meaning that 89,500 passports were issued in the eight months between February and September).

The distribution of Russian passports in the “LNR” was much slower: Luhansk leader Pasechnik claimed in June 2022 that more than 284,000 passports had been issued – just 34,000 more than one year earlier, when Pasechnik put the number of Russian passports at more than 250,000.¹⁶ If those figures are to be believed, the “LNR” on average issued just 2,800 passports per month – far fewer than the “DNR”, even considering its smaller population. No official reason was given for this, but a local convention of the United Russia party in early February 2023 called for the issuing of Russian passports in the “LNR” to be sped up – without communicating new numbers.¹⁷

It was widely expected that de facto authorities will increase pressure on locals to accept Russian documents. The Ukrainian Mariupol city official Petro Andryushchenko predicted in January 2023 that conducting business activities will be impossible without a Russian passport after 1 March.¹⁸

While “passportisation” clearly faced capacity constraints, especially because of the war, the campaign’s success looks mixed: By early 2022, more than 2.5 years after it started, less than one third of the population (630,000 of just over 2 million people), had been reached – meaning

that probably more than two thirds of the local population retained Ukrainian documents. The fact that the “People’s Republics” never mentioned population figures in their communication about Russian passports shows that they themselves know well that their official population statistics have little to do with reality.

Demographics of depopulation

Officially, the “People’s Republics” claimed to have a combined population of 3.6 million in January 2022 – 1.4 million for the “LNR” and 2.2 million for the “DNR”.¹⁹ However, these figures ignore the mass exodus and declining birth rates during the past eight years, as well as COVID deaths (in 2021 the population declined by an extra 22,000 – see our Annual Report 2021 p. 8), mass evacuations in January and February and war-related casualties since 24 February.²⁰

The “People’s Republics” carried out a census in 2019 but never published the results. While there are no reliable figures, this report assumes that the real population of the areas controlled by Russia before 24 February numbers just 2 million – 800,000 in the “LNR” and 1.2 million in the “DNR”. These numbers can be calculated by dividing the number of births (5,444 in the “LNR” in 2020) with the birth rate for Ukraine in the same year (8.0) – which results in 680,500 – roughly 60,000 less than in the same calculation 2019.²¹ Birth numbers in the “LNR” continued to decline in 2021, dropping to 5,007. For 2022, when the “Republic” officially gained some half a million inhabitants, the number of births rose only minimally to 5,186.²²

The “DNR” birth calculation for 2020 – the last available birth rate – results in 1.06 million people, 120,000 less than in 2019.²³ “DNR” birth statistics also continued sliding downward – from 8,524 in 2020 to 8,000 in 2021. For 2022, the “DNR” only released figures for the first 6 months – 3,544, which, if projected, means 7,000 births per year – 1,000 less than in 2021 and a twice as large reduction as in the previous year.

Given that those inhabitants who left are disproportionately young, while those staying are disproportionately old, birth-centered calculations should be treated with care and the real number of inhabitants must be assumed to be somewhat higher – thus 2 million may be a realistic estimate.

More up to date figures were elusive because it was unclear how many inhabitants remained in largely destroyed cities like Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk. The biggest territorial gains were made in the “LNR”, where Moscow claimed control of the entire Luhansk region after taking Lysychansk on 3 July.²⁴ “LNR”

leader Pasechnik said in April that he expects the “Republic” to gain up to half a million new inhabitants. This looks like an interpretation of official population figures minus 200,000 – according to January 2022 figures the “LNR” had 1.4 million inhabitants, and the entire Luhansk region had – according to Ukrainian figures – 2.1 million.²⁵

Mariupol birth numbers down by more than 80 per cent

In the Donetsk region, the real population of Mariupol remained unclear. The Azov port city, which was almost completely destroyed during the Russian assault in the spring, remained vastly underpopulated in 2022. According to figures published by the exiled Ukrainian city administration in June, the pre-war population of about 425,000 had fallen to between 100,000 and 120,000 – more than 22,000 civilians were killed, 47,000 were deported to Russia and Belarus and the rest fled. “DNR” leader Pushilin claimed in May that more than 200,000 people remained in the city. In December, the Russian-appointed mayor Konstantin Ivashchenko claimed that just 200,000 people had fled and that 50,000 or 60,000 of them had returned. The lawful mayor Vadym Boichenko suggested in January that more than 30,000 Russians were in the city, ranging from construction workers to members of the infamous Chechen Kadyrovtsy formations.²⁶

A clearer picture of the city’s massive population loss can be read from official birth statistics. Russian occupation authorities reported in January 2023 that 344 babies were born in Mariupol during the eight-months between 20 April and December 2022. This contrasts with 3,115 births recorded in 2020. The figures suggest that the number of newborns per month dropped from 260 in 2020 to just 43 in 2022 – or to just 16 per cent of the pre-invasion figure.²⁷

Security

Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine after 24 February took an especially heavy toll in Donbas, not only because the region became the main battleground after Russia's withdrawal from Kyiv and northern Ukraine on 31 March, but because the "People's Republics" carried out an all-out mobilization since 19 February, press-gang[ing] much of the local male population into the local "people's militias" which bore the brunt of the fighting not only in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions but also in Kherson.

The forced mobilization was widely documented on social networks like Telegram and V Kontakte, where video footage showed military recruiters chasing down young men in shops, parking lots and even kindergartens.²⁸

It was not clear how many people were subjected to this, but the practice was clearly aimed to provide the invasion forces with manpower that could not be raised in Russia – until 21 September, when President Putin, faced with Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkiv and Kherson, finally announced mobilization at home. The use of mobilized troops from Russian-controlled Donbas allowed Moscow to avoid much political fallout from casualty figures, because the victims – despite often having Russian citizenship – did not come from (Russian) regions whose public opinion is relevant for the Kremlin.

High casualty figures in the "DNR"

While the effects of mobilization were clearly massive, there were no reliable figures about how many men were drafted and how many casualties were incurred. The only exception was the office of "DNR" ombudswoman Daria Morozova, which published military casualty figures until December 2022. According to this data, 4,133 military personnel from the "DNR" were killed and 17,379 were injured between 1 January and 15 December. It also said that 1,084 civilians were killed and 3,484 were injured in the same period.²⁹

The "DNR" figures were considerably higher than those of the United Nations – who could record only 486 killed and 1,650 injured in both "DNR" and "LNR" (territory controlled by Russia in Donbas) between 24 February and 2 January. The UN recorded higher casualties on Government-controlled territory (3,576 killed and 4,024 injured), adding to a total of 4,062 killed civilians and another 5,674 injured in both Donetsk and Luhansk regions.³⁰ The difference can be explained most probably with a lack of access for the UN to Russian-controlled areas.

Assuming that very few of them occurred before the invasion, the "DNR" casualties can be broken down to 98 killed and 414 injured soldiers per week in the 42-week period between 24 February and 15 December. This is a high casualty rate – if estimates are correct that the "DNR" armed formations (the "people's militia") initially numbered little more than 10,000 (more than half of the combined separatist forces of 20,000). Morozova's office stopped publishing military casualty figures thereafter without giving a reason. The "LNR" never released any meaningful casualty figures.

The high casualty figures can be taken as evidence of poor training and morale. Thus, "DNR" field commander and blogger Alexander Khodakovskiy suggested in November that up to 60 per cent of Russian losses in Mariupol – where "DNR" forces are thought to have taken the brunt of the fighting – were caused by friendly fire.³¹ Most analysts agree that by sending recruits from the "People's Republics" and Wagner mercenaries (many of whom were recruited from prisoners) to the front, the Kremlin was using those as cannon fodder whose perishing does not matter for public opinion and domestic Russian politics.

Military integration proving difficult

As a result of annexation, the armed formations in both Donetsk and Luhansk were also merged into the Russian armed forces. Known officially as "people's militias", the formations are known to have been commanded by Russian officers since their inception in 2014. Divided into a 1st Corps (Donetsk) and 2nd Corps (Luhansk), they were subordinated to the Russian Eighth Guards Combined Arms Army, based in the neighbouring Russian Rostov Region and apparently set up especially for the war in Donbass.³²

Despite this, the integration of the "militias" seemed beset with difficulties. In February 2023, prominent Russian war blogger Alexander Sladkov wrote that many local officers had been dismissed because they did not meet Russia's criteria – a remark that throws light on the militia's quality given the underwhelming performance of Russia's regular armed forces. A prominent victim was apparently longtime "DNR" military spokesman Eduard Basurin, whose daily briefings suddenly stopped on 13 November. "DNR" leader Pushilin commented on Basurin's disappearance on 10 February, saying that he had been offered a range of jobs and that nobody should worry about him.³³

The Defence Ministry in Moscow said on 31 December that both Corps had been fully integrated into the Rus-

sian Armed Forces by 1 January. In February the ministry denied any sackings due to the merger – without mentioning Basurin.³⁴

The main other elements of the Kremlin's tactics of "outsourcing" the fighting – the "Wagner" mercenaries and units from Chechnya – received little official attention in the "People's Republics". While "Wagner" units played a prominent role in the battle for Bakhmut, the mercenary group was hardly mentioned in official media before January 2023. The "LNR" also gave little attention to Apti Alaudinov, a prominent Chechen fighter who was appointed a deputy commander of the Luhansk-based 2nd Corps in November 2022.³⁵

Human Rights

The human rights situation, already catastrophic, worsened further due to the war. Apart from ubiquitous war crimes, the biggest issue was probably the treatment of civilians in the newly occupied territories. Ukrainian rights groups and officials accused Moscow of abductions and mass deportations to Russia.

The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) said in two reports released in 2022 that Russia was violating multiple provisions of Humanitarian Law and Human Rights in Ukraine.³⁶

In February 2023, the UN refugee agency UNHCR accused Russia of violating „fundamental principles of child protection" in wartime by giving Ukrainian children from occupied areas Russian passports and putting them up for adoption.³⁷ The UNHCR said that it could not provide numbers, but the US group Conflict Observatory said in a report published in the same month that Moscow had systematically relocated at least 6,000 children to Russia.³⁸ Ukrainian officials have put that number much higher, saying that at least 13,000 children had been brought to Russia. Human rights experts have called Russia's treatment of Ukrainian children a war crime, while others, like historian Timothy Snyder have called for classifying it as genocide.³⁹

The exact number of Ukrainians that entered Russia since 24 February 2022 is not clear. The government in Moscow spoke of 5 million refugees in December, while the UNHCR only gives the number of 2.8 million border crossings.⁴⁰ (These figures also include cases from outside Donbas).

Forced mobilization meant that large parts of the male population were being press ganged into the local armed

formations regardless of their will or citizenship. While there was little documentation, rights activists said that recruiters in the "People's Republics" have also enlisted Ukrainian passport holders on the basis that they were born on "DNR" territory.⁴¹ This practice is widely seen as a war crime, because it forces inhabitants of an occupied territory to betray their allegiance to their state of origin.⁴² Ukrainian human rights activists also said that the "DNR" and "LNR" were recruiting 16- and 17-year old minors.⁴³

The practice of arbitrary extra-legal detentions also continued. At least four local staff members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Donetsk and Luhansk were abducted and accused of espionage for Ukraine after the OSCE's Monitoring Mission was evacuated following the invasion. By September, three of them were still being held – and the two in Luhansk had been sentenced to 13 years in prison (Newsletter 106).

Economy

The war also seriously worsened an already dire economic situation. First and foremost, the all-out mobilization exacerbated the region's key problem – brain drain and labour shortages.

Officials in the "People's Republics" have complained for years that trained and able-bodied professionals are missing across sectors – a fact that was highlighted when understaffed hospitals were overwhelmed by the COVID-catastrophe in 2020 and 2021. In 2022, the ruthless mobilization campaign resulted in a catastrophic workforce depletion for key industrial enterprises that mainly rely on male workers.

Mobilization paralyzes coalmines

A case in point was made by Leonid Pasechnik during his first meeting with Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin in December, when the "LNR" leader admitted that 58 per cent of the Vostokugol coalmine holding's staff had been drafted into the war – and that as a result operations were paralyzed and the state corporation could not pay wages anymore (see Newsletter 108).

Pasechnik went on to beg Putin for subsidies to keep the holding afloat – and complained that it was challenged by illegal private mines (kopanki in local parlance) which, he claimed, operate profitable because they paid no or much fewer taxes. He did not explain, however, why local authorities could not solve the problem themselves,

e.g. by enforcing tax payments or lowering them. Putin replied that subsidies could be paid for some time but stressed that the “LNR” should “analyze”, why its state mines were unable to operate efficiently.

Vostokugol was formed in April 2020 after the “LNR” leadership closed unprofitable mines following a sharp drop in demand at the onset of the COVID pandemic. The closures were accompanied by unprecedented strikes and unrest over wage arrears and pay cuts. Ukraine’s Luhansk region is the chief producer of anthracite coal, which has a very high energy density.

In his meeting with Putin on the same day, “DNR” leader Pushilin also complained about labour shortages, saying that up to 70 per cent of communal workers were missing. While Putin agreed to raise wages, the overall situation apparently had not improved by February, when “DNR” Economic Development Minister Vladimir Zverkov (a recent appointee from Moscow) said during a TV interview that the lack of people was the main problem for rebuilding the local economy.⁴⁴

Zverkov promised a range of measure to bring the economy back on track, a key feature being a special economic zone, which would introduce preferential tax and customs regimes for all annexed territories. A similar scheme has been in place for annexed Crimea since 2015. The minister also said that he would focus his work on small and medium-sized businesses, which would be supported by a special fund and easier access to credit.

A similar language was adopted by first deputy Prime minister Rustam Mingazov (another import from Russia), who said on 8 February 2023 that “a direct dialogue between government and business” was the only way forward.⁴⁵ Clearly, such language has been unusual in the “DNR”, where businesses typically either quietly reaped monopoly profits or had to fear raids from law enforcement agencies.

Expropriation looms

Little was heard from Yevgeny Yurchenko, the mysterious Russian “investor”, who took control of the large plants formerly managed by the secretive Vneshtorgservis holding in 2021. In November, however, he gave an interview to Russian media outlet RBC, where he claimed that his Southern Mining and Metals Complex (YuGMK) had invested more than 40 billion roubles (500 million euros), but that production had to be cut on average by 30 per cent because up to 20 per cent of the workforce had been mobilized.⁴⁶

Yurchenko added that YuGMK, which runs eight plants, five in the “DNR” and three in the “LNR”, produced more than two million tons of metals and steel in 2022 and planned to increase production to between three and 3.5 million tons in 2023.⁴⁷ In 2021 he had still expected an output of five million tons for 2022. For comparison: The Yenakiive metals plant alone produced more than 1 million tons of steel annually before 2014 (see our Annual Report 2021, p. 9).

Yurchenko told RBC that he could sell his production only in Russia, partly because of the fact that Russian products have “become toxic” for “unfriendly countries”. The Russian government in 2022 designated more than 60 countries – mostly in Europe and North America as “unfriendly”, and another 50 – mainly from the Global South – as “friendly countries”.

The businessman admitted that his holding was not the lawful owner of the plants, which were officially put under “external administration” in 2017. He predicted that the Russian Trade and Industry Ministry or the Republics would become transitional owners before an official privatization would take place – meaning that Moscow would officially expropriate the Ukrainian lawful owners.

Conclusion

The history of the “People’s Republics” before 24 February 2022 is both an important prequel to Russia’s ongoing war of aggression and a showcase of what awaits those Ukrainian regions who came under Russian occupation thereafter. The eight-year reign of local regimes that meandered between lawless banditry and military-bureaucratic dictatorships, the abolition of free speech, independent media and justice have created quasi black holes, where the complete disrespect for human rights is manifested by arbitrary detentions, incarcerations and torture.

In the run-up to the full-scale invasion in February and throughout the year 2022, Moscow’s exploitative relationship with the region became apparent. The “People’s Republics” are a key asset of the Russian propaganda efforts. Forced mobilization of much of the male population into units deployed at predominantly dangerous front sections helped to delay mobilization in Russia proper.

Moscow accepts the continuing economic and demographic decline of the region accelerated by the military escalation. Despite signs that local warlordism and corruption are being replaced by more Moscow-style technocratic governance, there is no reason for comfort whatsoever. While the old territories controlled by “DNR” and “LNR” have largely been cleansed of any meaningful political opposition, more aggressive and cruel forms of government should be expected in those areas that were conquered in 2022 and thereafter.

This is not to say that the population in the “People’s Republics” is organically pro-Russian. The little sociological research conducted during the past years suggests that substantial amounts of pro-Ukrainian sentiment and identity were preserved between 2016 and 2019 (at around 55 per cent, according to the Berlin-based Center for East European and International Studies).⁴⁸ However, the usefulness of telephone surveys under conditions of authoritarianism is disputed – and mobilization, war and annexation have certainly shifted parameters. Ukrainian media reports suggest that the lifting of a travel ban for men under 55 prompted a new wave of emigration to Russia after annexation.⁴⁹

Years of oppression and propaganda plus the exodus of large parts of the population makes Moscow’s rule over Donetsk and Luhansk easier than over newly occupied parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, where the legacy of the past eight years is strong and where Ukrainian resistance groups have launched attacks against occupation authorities and local collaborators.

Also, the “People’s Republics” served as springboards for Russia’s invasion forces – as did annexed Crimea and Belarus. The territorial expansion of the „people’s republics” was accompanied by the destruction of eastern Ukrainian cities such as Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, and Bakhmut. Clearly, any Ukrainian territory under Russian control will remain a massive security threat for Ukraine.

While Russia’s biggest challenge will be in the coming months to defend the “People’s Republics” against Ukrainian counteroffensives, Ukraine’s biggest challenge may well be to re-establish political control over them – if it succeeds militarily. Unlike in the previously government-controlled areas, the level of collaboration and cooptation in Donetsk has been high. Judging from the figures of issued passports before February 2022, at least one third of the local population has sufficient sympathy for Russia to switch citizenship. This presents immense challenges for stability and reintegration once Ukrainian political authority returns to these areas.

Sources

Note: After 24 February, many official websites in Russia and the “People’s Republics” have been accessible only from Russian IP-addresses. Some of them remain accessible via VPN.

Ukrainian Media

Novosti Donbassa <http://novosti.dn.ua/> One of the most balanced Ukrainian news outlets, originally from Donetsk.

Realnaya Gazeta <http://realgazeta.com.ua/> Independent online newspaper, originally from Luhansk.

Hromadske Radio <https://hromadskeradio.org/>

Kanal Dom <https://kanaldom.tv/> Russian-language state broadcaster for Donbas and Crimea.

Strana: <https://strana.today/> Ukraine’s most prominent Russian-leaning outlet, sometimes publishes useful reports from the “People’s Republics”

Media from the “DNR”

Donetskoe Agentstvo Novostei (DAN) <http://dan-news.info/> The official “DNR” news site, close to its leader Denis Pushilin. Reliable, but covers only a highly restrictive range of topics.

“Official site of the DNR” <https://днронлайн.рф/> Run by the Information “Ministry” and publishes official information and decrees. Accessible only with Russian IP!

Website of Denis Pushilin <https://denis-pushilin.ru/> Official texts, videos and links to the “DNR” leader’s social media channels.

First Republican – Official “DNR” TV channel, accessible via VK: <https://vk.com/1respublikanskiy>

Union <http://tk-union.tv/> (Accessible only with Russian IP!) Donetsk TV station under “DNR” control since 2014. Thought to be more popular than “First Republican”

DNR Live <http://dnr-live.ru/> News portal linked to Pavel Gubarev and the Free Donbass (Svobodny Donbass) movement. Not updated since June 2022.

Donbassky Case <https://t.me/donbasscase> Anonymous Telegram channel infrequently critical of local authorities.

Media from the “LNR”

Luganski Informatsionni Tsentri (LITs) <http://lug-info.com/> Official “LNR” news site, generally less informative than “DNR” sites.

Website of Leonid Pasechnik: <https://главалнр.рф/> The “LNR” leader’s site.

“State television” GTRK <https://gtrklnr.ru/> The official “LNR” TV station produces markedly less content than its “DNR” equivalents. Accessible only with Russian IP!

Tainy Luganskoi Respubliki <https://t.me/TLRes> Anonymous Telegram channel often critical of local authorities.

Russian Media

Tass news agency <http://tass.ru/> State-run, usually reliable

RIA Novosti news agency <https://ria.ru/> State-run and markedly more partisan than Tass. Closely cooperates with propaganda outlets <https://ukraina.ru/>, SNA (Sputnik) and RT

Interfax <https://www.interfax.ru/> Russia’s only private news agency, reliable.

RBC <https://www.rbc.ru/> Liberal media group often critical of the Kremlin.

Kommersant <https://www.kommersant.ru/> A leading liberal business newspaper.

The Insider <https://theins.ru/> An independent investigative website exiled in Latvia

Endnotes

- 1 Zelenskyy interview with Bloomberg News, November 2022 <https://youtu.be/1GPhcD9iAvA>
- 2 <https://днронлайн.пф/pravitelstvo/> and <https://днронлайн.пф/spravochnaya-informatsiya-ministerstva/>
- 3 https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/zois-spotlight/bildung-unter-beschuss-das-ukrainische-schulsystem-unter-bedingungen-der-okkupation?utm_source=pocket_saves
- 4 <https://dan-news.ru/politics/spiker-parlamenta-dnr-poluchil-partbilet-edinoj-rossii/> The “DNR” parliament has 100 seats
- 5 <https://dan-news.ru/politics/andrej-kramar-izbran-koordinatom-regionalnogo-otdelenija-ldpr-v-dnr/> (Kramar) <https://lug-info.com/news/regional-noe-otdelenie-liberal-no-demokraticeskoj-partii-rossii-sozdano-v-lnr/> (Uvarov)
- 6 <https://lug-info.com/news/kompartiya-rossii-otkryla-regional-noe-otdelenie-v-lnr/> (the “LNR” communists are led by local activist Igor Gumenyuk) <https://kprf.ru/international/ussr/215006.html> (DNR)
- 7 <https://tass.ru/politika/16989177> (A Just Russia) <https://dan-news.ru/politics/partija-novye-ljudi-planiruet-otkryt-svoe-regionalnoe-otdelenie-v-dnr-8/> (New People)
- 8 <https://novosti.dn.ua/ru/article/8162-yavka-pod-99-kak-v-l-dnr-poluchili-takie-vysokie-rezultaty-na-referendumah>
- 9 <https://tass.ru/politika/16074107>
- 10 <https://mid-dnr.su/ru/pages/news/>, <https://vk.com/dprembassy> and <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/10/06/posolstva/> (Miroshnik)
- 11 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5756972>
- 12 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2022> (Russia) and <https://freedomhouse.org/country/crimea/freedom-world/2022> (Crimea)
- 13 http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_427971/5bdc78bf7e3015a0ea0c0ea5bef708a6c79e2f0a/
- 14 <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/publications/human-rights-context-automatic-naturalization-crimea>
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- 16 <https://lug-info.com/news/bolee-284-tys-zhitelej-lnr-uzhe-stali-grazhdanami-rossii-pasechnik> (2022) and <https://lug-info.com/statements/zayavlenie-glavy-luganskoj-narodnoj-respubliki> (2021)
- 17 <https://lug-info.com/news/edinaya-rossiya-schitaet-neobhodimym-uskorit-process-vydachi-zhityam-lnr-pasportov-rf>
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- 24 <https://lug-info.com/news/vs-rf-i-narodnaya-miliciya-lnr-polnost-yu-osvobodili-territoriyu-respubliki-minoborony> In September Ukraine won back Bilohorivka, a suburb of Lysychansk.
- 25 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/19/russia-no-longer-has-full-control-of-luhansk-as-ukraine-recaptures-village> and https://ukrstat.gov.ua/druk/publi-cat/kat_u/2022/zb/05/zb_%D0%A1huselnist.pdf
- 26 <https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/stalo-izvestno-na-skolko-umenshilos-kolichestvo-naselenija-mariupolja-za-vremja-polnomasshtabnoj-vojni.html> (Ukrainian figures); <https://dan-news.info/obschestvo/naselenie-mariupolja-posle-boev-ocenivaetsja-bolee-chem-v-200-tysjach-chelovek/> (Pushilin); <https://novosti.dn.ua/ru/news/341056-v-okkupirovannom-mariupole-nahodyatsya-bolee-30-tysyach-rossiyan> (Boichenko);
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- 29 <https://ombudsman-dnr.ru/obzor-soczialno-gumanitarnoj-situacii-slozhivshejsya-na-territorii-doneczkoj-narodnoj-respubliki-vsledstvie-voennyh-dejstvij-v-period-s-10-po-16-dekabrya-2022-g/> (15 December) <https://ombudsman-dnr.ru/obzor-soczialno-gumanitarnoj-situacii-slozhivshejsya-na-territorii-doneczkoj-narodnoj-respubliki-vsledstvie-voennyh-dejstvij-v-period-s-24-po-30-dekabrya-2022-g/> (30 December) The office noted that the figures only include personnel from territories controlled by the “DNR” before 24 February – and there were no reports about occupation authorities recruiting meaningful numbers in newly conquered areas.

- 30 Report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/01/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-3-january-2023>
- 31 https://t.me/aleksandr_skif/2472
- 32 See "Beyond Frozen Conflict", p 117 f.
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- 34 <https://ria.ru/20221231/korpusa-1842655719.html> and https://t.me/mod_russia/24272
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- 37 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/un-refugee-chief-russia-violating-principles-child-protection-ukraine-2023-01-27/>
- 38 <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/apps/sites/#/home/pages/children-camps-1>
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- 41 <https://theins.ru/obshchestvo/256678> Quote by Polina Murygina from the Every Human Being NGO.
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- 48 <https://www.zois-berlin.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/mehrheit-im-gesamten-donbass-verortet-die-selbsternannten-volksrepubliken-weiterhin-in-der-ukraine>
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The history of the “People’s Republics” before 24 February 2022 is both an important prequel to Russia’s ongoing war of aggression and a showcase of what awaits those Ukrainian regions who came under Russian occupation thereafter. The eight-year reign of local regimes that meandered between lawless banditry and military-bureaucratic dictatorships, the abolition of free speech, independent media and justice have created quasi black holes, where the complete disrespect for human rights is manifested by arbitrary detentions, incarcerations and torture.

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