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## The Donbas Dilemma: Examining Russia's Path to Full-Scale Intervention

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### Abstract

This article delves into the complex evolution of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, focusing on the dynamics of the political, economic and institutional situation in the Russian-occupied territories during the Donbas War (2014–2022) and their far-reaching implications for Russia and Ukraine. All attempts to reintegrate those territories with Ukraine through the Minsk Process failed. By 2022, the occupied Donbas territories were de-facto economically, politically, culturally, and institutionally integrated with Russia. As a result, Russia found itself trapped in a perplexing predicament. It could not de-jure integrate the Donbas territories without significant reputational and economic losses. Yet it was equally unable to relinquish them, even as it became clear that they would not help to establish Russian control over Ukraine. As a result, Russia found itself in a situation in which attacking seemed like a viable option to overcome a deadlock.

### Introduction

The path leading to the current Russian war against Ukraine is still not clearly understood. Various explanations have been proposed for Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, including the potential positive effects of wars for authoritarian leaders (Kendall-Taylor/Frantz 2023), the personalistic nature of Putin's dictatorship (Gomza 2022), the decline in Putin's popularity domestically (Treisman 2022) and growing concerns about external threats (Mearsheimer 2014; McFaul et al. 2014). While these factors undoubtedly played a role in the overall course of events, it is crucial to consider another significant, and often overlooked, aspect of this process: the dynamics of the Donbas War (2014–2022) and its consequences for Russia and Ukraine.

I argue that Russia's move to take total control over the unrecognized Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (DPR and LPR) led to Putin's own (self-)deception, eventually trapping him within the reality he had constructed. By 2022, the occupied territories had evolved into an independent concern, further exacerbating the impasse in terms of Russia's broader goals in Ukraine. Failing in its attempt to use the Donbas War to manipulate Ukraine, Russia found itself in a situation in which full-scale invasion seemed like the only viable option.

### From Chaos to Russian Domination

Many experts and scholars believe there was a "Putin's Plan" from the beginning of the Donbas War to fight the war against Ukraine and occupy as much Ukrainian territory as possible (Mitrokhin 2015; Umland 2014, 2016). Recent studies point to clear signs that Russia was caught by surprise by the rapid evolution of the situation in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts (Arel & Driscoll 2023; Arutunyan 2022). However, even though Russia seemed to have been initially unprepared to take full

advantage of the rapid development of the situation in Ukraine, it cemented control over these Ukrainian territories within the first year of the conflict.

The first Minsk Agreements and the law on creating the L/DPR armed forces were signed in September. The coercive integration of the non-state armed groups, which appeared in spring 2014, into the joint military structure of L/DPR, the Ministry of State Security, began. Some militiamen, both locals and those from Russia, who joined the fight in the spring and summer of 2014 gradually abandoned the new military structures. Those who did not want to be subject to the new rules were pushed out or killed. On 30 March 2015, separatist authorities ordered those not belonging to the formal armed structures to forfeit all their weaponry or face criminal charges (UN OHCHR 2015). However, in practice it took several years to eliminate all armed groups who did not wish to be controlled by the L/DPR. Most of the warlords who started the fight in 2014 were either assassinated (usually through bombings) or otherwise died in "accidents" (usually car crashes). Removing the most visible and devoted combatants and leaders of independent armed groups, including Russians, was a crucial step toward establishing Russian domination in the region.

### Economic Deadlock

Regarding the economic dimension, the war had detrimental effects on the Donbas region: the destruction of infrastructure, the decline of industries, the displacement of populations, and a general decline in economic activity (Mykhnenko 2020, Crisis Group 2020).

Before 2014, Donbas was wealthy compared to other Ukrainian regions but, at the same time, was in economic decline. The region was both subsidized by Ukraine's government and profit-making (Mykhnenko

2020). While in 2011 the gross regional products of Donetsk and Luhansk accounted for roughly 12% and 4% of national GDP, respectively, they received 27% and 11% of all central government subsidies and transfers to regions (Novosti Donbassa 2012).

Before the conflict, the Donetsk region was above the national average on all major economic indicators (such as Gross Regional Product, Gross Added Value, turnover, export/import balance, investments, and household income). The Luhansk region was level with the national average for Ukraine. By 2015, the Donetsk region (both government-controlled and non-government-controlled parts) was below the national average on all indicators, while the Luhansk region had fallen even further and now counted among Ukraine's poorest regions. Between 2013 and 2015, the population living below the minimum subsistence level increased from 22% to 66% in the Donetsk region and 20% to 74% in the Luhansk region. The Donetsk region saw a 72% reduction in the export of goods and a 73% reduction in imports, while the Luhansk region experienced 88% and 81% reductions, respectively (FS-Cluster 2017).

The war has generally resulted in rapid and severe deindustrialization in the area. At the beginning of 2015, mines and factories in the LPR and DPR still functioned on the investments made in peacetime. After those investments were exhausted, it was the turn of a new DPR and LPR leadership to subsidize these enterprises. This did not happen. From 2014 to 2022, many coal mines were closed, resulting in the loss of 63,200 jobs and a tenfold salary decline in dollar equivalent compared to the pre-war period in the coal sector (VPG 2020). In 2020, most factories in the region produced only 15–20% of their pre-war volume. Many industrial enterprises were closed with no possibility of restarting in the near future.

This economic decline and the illegal practices that dried out industrial facilities and budgets made the unrecognized People's Republics utterly dependent on Russia. Since 2017, when Ukraine cut all economic connections with the territories of the unrecognized republics, Russia became the only significant economic partner for the unrecognized territories. Already in 2016–2017, a large part of the LPR and DPR budgets came from Russia, a tendency which persisted through at least 2022. According to Ukrainian government sources and non-government experts, as of 2020, Russia spent (excluding military expenditures) roughly \$1.5–2 billion a year, or about 0.1% of its GDP, on the de facto republics (Zn. ua 2020, de Waal/von Twickel 2020).

The LPR and DPR economies have over the past years become a huge money-laundering scheme. While Russian money filled the budgets of the unrecognized republics, from which they paid pensions and state

workers, most local enterprises' income went to private individuals. Despite sanctions, much of the coal from the breakaway territories was sold to outside markets—India, Belarus, and, apparently, Ukraine—after being reclassified as Russian, enriching the intermediaries involved in this process (Shpak 2021). Russia significantly increased coal exports from its own territory to capture markets formerly served by the recently seized mines. Absurdly, Ukraine had doubled imports of Russian anthracite since the start of the blockade—in 2018, 91% of Ukraine's imports of this valuable coal (valued at \$70 million) were from Russia (Milakovsky 2018).

### Political and Cultural Integration of the Unrecognized Republics

By autumn 2014, all important political decisions in the unrecognized republics were made without considering local leaders' official procedures or opinions. By 2022, the local political scene in the republics was wholly controlled by Russia. All political competition had been annihilated. None of the separatist officials in Donbas were freely elected, and their de facto governments operated with extreme opacity, making it difficult to discern how much autonomy they had in practice vis-à-vis the Russian government (FH 2021). During the last elections in 2018, Moscow-approved leaders—Denis Pushilin in the DPR and Leonid Pasechnik in the LPR—won virtually uncontested elections, while only ruling and spoiler parties were allowed to participate in local legislative elections. Party lists were composed of local people loyal to the Republics, while the locally registered Communist Party was not even allowed to participate in the elections. The only real opposition to the republics' leadership came from influential separatist veterans. Still, the authorities thwarted their political aspirations: the Donbas Republican Party, created by one of the DPR's founding fathers and former head of the legislature, Andrei Purgin, was denied registration (Skorkin 2021). In 2021, the leaders of both republics publicly joined United Russia, the powerful Russian political party that the Kremlin uses to control political appointees and regional politics. Those voicing pro-Ukrainian views were detained; protests provoked by the worsening economic situation were suppressed (HRMMU 2021). Supporters of the People's Republics who were critical of their politics and the worsening social situation also faced repressions.

Both the DPR and LPR abolished Ukrainian as a state language in 2020. Russia acknowledged local schools and university diplomas; in 2021, the most prominent university in Donetsk received Russian accreditation. In addition, due to COVID restrictions traveling to Ukrainian-controlled territories was limited, and the number of "contact line" crossings was

dramatically reduced.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, Vladimir Putin signed a decree allowing DPR and LPR territory residents to obtain a Russian passport through a simplified procedure. As of January 2022, more than 720,000 Donbas residents had obtained Russian passports.<sup>2</sup> This “passportisation” not only obstructed the negotiation process and implementation of the Minsk Accords and undermined Ukrainian sovereignty; it also contributed to the region’s socio-demographic upheaval by incentivizing working-age professionals and those who had relatives in Russia to immigrate there (Bescotti et al. 2022; Burkhardt 2020).

In essence, before February 2022, the occupied Ukrainian territories had already been de facto economically and politically, as well as culturally and institutionally, integrated with Russia. They were depopulated and impoverished as well.

### War as Politics by Other Means

By providing the LPR and DPR with military and economic support, without which the republics could not resist Ukraine’s armed forces, Russia totally subjugated the territories of the unrecognized republics and, later, fully integrated them to a level not seen in Russia’s other de facto client states. Even though Russia had used some similar strategies before, for example issuing Russian passports (in Abkhazia) or even lobbying for special status within a parent state (for Transdnistria), its goal in the case of the DPR and LPR was not gaining loyalty and control over the territory, but rather manipulation of the parent-state, Ukraine. Total Russian domination in the unrecognized territories served a specific objective: to regain control over Ukraine through their reintegration (Sushko 2017) or, failing that, to keep the conflict simmering under Moscow’s control (Charnap 2020; Malyarenko & Wolff 2018). The process of peace talks and the evolution of the Minsk Accords was especially telling in this respect.

In August 2014, the favorable developments on the battlefield allowed Russia to insert several clauses into Minsk-I, signed on September 15, including the adoption of a “law on special status” that would temporarily decentralize power to occupied Donbas (Duncan 2022). This favored the prolongation of the abnormal situation. However, there was no mention of changing the Ukrainian constitution in Minsk-I (Sandra 2019). This only appeared in Minsk-II, a new document signed on 2 February 2015, after another intensification of fighting involving the Russian army. The political sections

of Minsk-II provided the DPR and LPR with “special status” within Ukraine, letting Ukraine resume its control over the border only after local elections were held; strengthened Russian presence in the region through assistance from the central authorities to support “transnational cooperation” between the occupied regions and regions of the Russian Federation; and provided rights for local parliaments to create “people’s militia units,” i.e., to have a local army (see also Åtland 2020). These gradually escalating demands reflected Russia’s commitment to averting the emergence of an unfriendly government in Ukraine.

Russia pursued and succeeded in obtaining more explicit requirements for constitutional changes securing long-term influence in Ukraine through its proxy regimes in Donbas (Malyarenko & Wolff 2018). Leaked emails suggested that Vladislav Surkov’s<sup>3</sup> office appeared to be focused on changing Ukraine’s Constitution, starting with the mechanism for introducing constitutional amendments (Sandra 2019). Surkov coordinated the drafting of extra demands published on 13 May, 2015 as proposals from the D/LPR. Essentially, these proposed amendments to Ukraine’s Constitution would have allowed unrecognized republics to act as separate states which would be reincorporated into Ukraine not as regions with a certain amount of autonomy, but as distinct political, economic, and legal entities tied to Russia and able to influence Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy (Duncan 2022). Those proposals were rejected by Ukraine, where even the careful introduction of the “special status” law incited strong reactions from Ukrainian civil society and a number of political blocs, as well as harsh criticism of Poroshenko’s (and later Zelenskyy’s) policies (Medium 2017).

Thus, Ukraine encountered resistance to granting the breakaway territories a special status, and the associated economic costs made the prospect virtually unattainable. As a result, Russia found itself in possession of impoverished lands that it could not de jure integrate without exacerbating its already complex international situation and incurring substantial future expenses for reconstruction.

Furthermore, these territories no longer held the promise of fulfilling Russia’s initial goal: restoring control over Ukraine. The occupation of Crimea and part of the Donbas prevented roughly 12 percent of Ukrainian voters disproportionately sympathetic to candidates and parties that supported closer ties with Russia from participating in elections (D’Anieri 2019). Eight years

1 Because the “contact line” remains largely closed, residents of areas beyond government control are forced to enter government-controlled areas through Russia (OCHA Ukraine 2021).

2 This equated to no more than 40% of the population of the breakaway territories. According to separate estimates, as of 2022 the DPR and LPR territories retain only 45–70% of their four-million-plus 2014 population.

3 Between 2013 and 2020, Vladislav Surkov was a personal adviser of Vladimir Putin on relationships with Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Ukraine.

of war also changed Ukrainian public opinion. Ukrainian attitudes toward Russia and economic integration with it became much more negative after the invasion of Crimea, while attitudes toward joining NATO and the European Union experienced the opposite trend (KIIS 2021; Onuch 2022; Haran & Burkovskiy 2022). The weakening of pro-Russian parties and attitudes caused by Russia's invasion in 2014 helped create conditions in which Russia could not achieve its goals without an all-out invasion (D'Anieri 2022). At the same time, relinquishing control over occupied territories would have significantly damaged the Russian government's domestic public perception. For eight years, the Russian population had been indoctrinated with the idea of the necessity of protecting the people who lived in the unrecog-

nized republics from Ukrainian nationalists and fascists, and abandoning these territories could have been interpreted as a sign of weakness, both internally and abroad.

Thus, Russia found itself in a predicament—unable to hold onto these territories and unable to let them go, while the main goal of the eight-year venture seemed even more unattainable than before. The decision to launch a full-scale invasion in Ukraine, perhaps with the hope of a swift and triumphant outcome as anticipated by many in Russia, seemed like a way to break free from this deadlock without inflicting much pain on Russia. However, this war has unfolded neither briefly nor victoriously, further raising the stakes for the Russian regime. It transformed the issue of control over Ukraine into a high-stakes, zero-sum game.

#### *About the Author*

*Natalia Savelyeva* is a sociologist and lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (USA). She is also a researcher at the Public Sociology Laboratory. She earned her PhD in Social Sciences from the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her research primarily focuses on the violent conflict that began in Ukraine in 2014 and Russian society's response to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Her articles have been published in numerous international academic journals, as well as in Russian and international media. She is a co-author of the collective monograph "Politics of Apolitics" (2015, in Russian) and serves as co-editor for the analytical report "The War Near and Far" (2023, Imverlag).

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