

Towards de-facto annexation?

Current developments in the “People’s Republics”
of eastern Ukraine 2020/2021

Annual report

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Imprint

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Program: Civic monitoring in eastern Ukraine



Implemented with support from the Federal Foreign Office of Germany



Federal Foreign Office

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This report was produced as part of the project: Dialogue for understanding and justice: Strengthening civil society's contribution to conflict resolution, democratic and regional development and the preparation of safe reintegration in eastern Ukraine.

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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

The year 2020 in the Donbas was overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which by all accounts hit the “People’s Republics” hard but whose exact impact is hard to gauge, given the notorious secrecy of the separatist de facto authorities. More discernible was the pandemic’s economic effect which resulted in what is probably the severest downturn since 2014. However, despite serious labour unrest, growing wage arrears and the exodus of skilled workers, separatist leaders faced no serious challenges to their rule. Protected by a ruthless security apparatus, they continued to implement policies that deepen the rift between the separatist entities and the rest of Ukraine. There also was almost no noticeable effect from the ouster of Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov, whose responsibilities for eastern Ukraine were taken over by his rival Dmitry Kozak in February. Surkov is widely believed to have been the key Russian official who set up and ran the “People’s Republics” since 2014.

While security significantly improved thanks to the adherence to a renewed ceasefire brokered on 22 July, the overall situation remained volatile as some 80,000 troops remain stationed on both sides of the Contact Line. The massive deployment of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border and in Crimea in spring 2021 reminded the world that military escalation is also possible. The human rights situation inside the “People’s Republics” remained dismal - both critics and public supporters of the separatists risk detention and torture – and access to justice is practically not existent. Another serious problem that worsened in 2020 is the environmental crisis posed by the flooding of unused coalmines after the separatist stopped pumping water out of them.

This year’s annual report covers the year 2020 and the first three months of 2021.

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Politics

Vladislav Surkov’s ouster as the Kremlin’s point man for the “People’s Republics” on 18 February 2020 looked like the most significant political upheaval since their creation back in 2014. However, the appointment of Surkov’s rival Dmitry Kozak as a deputy head of the Presidential Administration with widened responsibilities for eastern Ukraine did not lead to a significant weakening or even replace-

ment of the separatist leadership appointed under Surkov, as was initially expected (see Newsletter 71).²

Kozak was at the centre of a row with Surkov in 2019, when the then-Kremlin curator accused him of selling out Donbas in order to limit costs and get sanctions lifted (see our Annual report 2019, p5).³ A long-time deputy prime minister overseeing economic policy vis-a-vis Donbass, Kozak is believed to be a pragmatist focused on making the status quo as stable and cost-effective for Moscow as possible. Surkov, on the other hand, was seen as an ideologue bent on promoting the concept of a “Russian world” that rallies Russian speakers regardless of ethnicity and location around the Kremlin. In an interview after his departure, Surkov said that Ukrainian identity was “a disorder of the mind” and that Donbass should not return to Ukraine “because it does not deserve such humiliation” and that Ukraine “does not deserve such an honor”.⁴

After assuming his new role, Kozak began a fresh push for diplomatic engagement with his Ukrainian counterpart Andriy Yermak, the head of President Volodymyr Zelenskii’s administration. On 11 March both attended Minsk Trilateral Contact Group talks where they signed an agreement to let civil society representatives from both sides join the talks (see Newsletter 72). However, the creation of a semi-formal “Consultative Council” proved highly unpopular in Ukraine, where opposition and pro-government lawmakers assailed it as giving too much legitimacy to the separatists. In May, the format was quietly dropped and Ukraine simply appointed four former Donbas natives (two from Donetsk and two from Luhansk) to join the talks, arguing that they would act as legitimate “alternatives” to the Kremlin-appointed separatists.⁵

The Contact Group officially consist of Ukraine, Russia and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Separatist representatives have been present at them since 2014, but without formally taking part. In January 2021, however, the separatists appointed their own “civil society representatives” for the talks.⁶ This consequently led to disagreements, and in March 2021 the Ukrainian delegation terminated a meeting (held online) to protest against the presence of “DNR” representative Maya Pirogova, a blogger and former “Information Ministry” official known for her anti-Ukrainian tirades.⁷

Overall, this Kozak-Yermak initiative did little to bring the talks forward, as both sides appointed outspoken hardliners as representatives – embodied not only by Pirogova but also by Ukrainian journalists Serhiy Garmash and Denis Kazansky, who both hail from Donetsk and have long advocated tougher policies against Russia and the separatists.

“Integration with Russia”

As in the past years, the “People’s Republics” continued their policies of “integration with Russia” i.e. russification of more and more aspects of public life, while paying little more than lip service to the Minsk Agreement, which stipulates reintegration with Ukraine. The issuing of Russian passports continued, although the process was interrupted for three months during the first wave of the pandemic. By the end of the year, more than 400,000 inhabitants are thought to have received Russian citizenship – some 200,000 from each “People’s Republic”.⁸ Russia began issuing its citizenship fast-track to holders of “Republican” passports after the election of Volodymyr Zelensky as President of Ukraine in 2019. The campaign has been denounced as illegal by Kyiv and its allies, who argue that this undermines Ukraine’s sovereignty and violates the Minsk Agreement.

At the time of publication of this report, activists – possibly with the Kremlin’s blessing – were campaigning to allow the Russian State Duma elections in September 2021 to be held inside separatist-controlled areas, arguing that many inhabitants with Russian passports could not travel to Russia to cast their vote there.⁹

In another highly symbolic step, both “People’s Republics” abolished Ukrainian as a state language in 2020. The “DNR” passed a constitutional amendment on 5 March, the “LNR” followed suit some 20 days later. While Ukrainian was hardly ever used in media and official communication, the “People’s Republics” thus gave up another vestige of being part of Ukraine (see Newsletters 72 and 73).

Integration with Russia was also promoted in the education sector. Both “Republics” championed the fact that local universities can issue Russian-style diplomas. The “DNR” said in August 2020 that more than 2,000 out of 11,800 graduates in that year were awarded with such certificates. Kyiv, on the other hand, said that 1,629 students from the “People’s Republics” enrolled in Ukrainian universities in autumn 2020.¹⁰ Similarly, the separatists announced that high schools would switch to Russian diplomas. The “DNR” said on 19 March 2021 that the Russian “Unified State Examination” would fully replace the previous exams within two years – until then, all schools would be subject to accreditation by the Russian state.¹¹ The “LNR” was more cautious, saying that scientists should decide whether a switch was necessary.¹²

The russification drive reached a new climax in January 2021, when separatist leaders gathered in Donetsk to declare that “Russian Donbas” is their new doctrine and Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of Kremlin broadcaster RT, called from the same stage “Mother Russia, take Donbas back home!” Speaking in Moscow two weeks

later, President Vladimir Putin stressed that Russia “will not abandon Donbas” but offered no answer to Simonyan’s plea.¹³

Even more pompous were some of the declarations on the anniversary of Russia’s annexation of Crimea on 18 March 2014. During a show for the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea in Moscow’s Luzhniki stadium on 18 March, Putin complained that the Soviet Union in the 1920s and Russia in the early 1990s had given up “colossal territories” and “geopolitical space”. Pushilin, speaking on the same day in Crimea, suggested that Donbass was on track to rejoin Russia: “Russia is returning its territories that were torn off by lies, deceit, war and manipulation”.¹⁴

However, this irredentist rhetoric was not matched by concrete steps. Amid repeated claims by separatist leaders that Ukraine was abandoning the Minsk Agreement, Kozak, in a wide-ranging interview with the Interfax news agency on 16 March 2021, reiterated that Moscow continues to adhere to the pact. “To renounce it means a return to the zero of February 2015 (when the “Package of Measures” or Minsk 2 was signed), render void all efforts to solve the conflict and directly lead to its indefinite freezing” he was quoted as saying.¹⁵

Ministers vanish, field commander rehabilitated

Meanwhile, government decision-making inside the “People’s Republics” remained opaque as ever, especially in Luhansk. Thus, “deputy prime minister” Natalya Tikhon-skaya suddenly vanished from the “LNR” government website in early January 2021, where she was replaced by a much younger woman called Anna Todorova. At the time of publication for this report, nothing was known about Tikhon-skaya’s fate or the reason for her dismissal (see Newsletter 86).

In late March, a certain Sergei Neverov suddenly appeared on the “LNR” official website as Industry and Trade “Minister”, but was nowhere mentioned in local media. According to the anonymous Telegram channel Tainy Luhanskoi Respubliki (Secrets of the Luhansk Republic), Neverov was a Moscow “curator” installed as minister because of the Kremlin’s frustration with local mismanagement.¹⁶ Also unexplained was the sudden replacement of “DNR” Trade and Industry “Minister” Eduard Armatov by Vladimir Rushchak in March 2020 (see Newsletter 73). Rushchak apparently fled Ukraine in 2015 after being charged with corruption in his office as head of the national accreditation body.¹⁷

At the same time separatist leaders continued their reconciliation with former critics. In March 2020, Pushilin

awarded medals to veterans of the “Vostok” armed formation together with its commander Alexander Khodakovsky, who in the past has been a vocal critic of both Pushilin and his predecessor Alexander Zakharchenko.¹⁸ Khodakovsky was exiled to Russia under Zakharchenko. After the separatist leader’s assassination in 2018 he was not allowed to enter the “DNR” in order to take part in the elections, which were duly “won” by Pushilin. He was allowed to return only in June 2019.

Khodakovsky’s rehabilitation follows the co-optation of separatist dissenters in 2019, when former “DNR” Foreign Minister Alexander Kofman and former “LNR” parliamentary speaker Alexei Karyakin were appointed to head the republics’ “public chambers”.

Coronavirus hit hard

The COVID-19-pandemic presented massive challenges to the “People’s Republics”, whose population is thought to be highly vulnerable because it is massively overaged following the large-scale exodus of working-age inhabitants. According to official figures, there are more than one million pensioners in the People’s Republics” – 662,000 in the “DNR” and more than 400,000 in the “LNR” – more than half of the local population (see Newsletter 73). Poor infrastructure and rock-bottom wages in the health sector and an ailing industrial economy make an adequate response all the more difficult. However, while the pandemic had devastating effects on the economy and public health, it seemingly did not hurt the separatist leadership, which was largely intact one year after it began.

The way how the “People’s Republics” responded to and how they communicated the pandemic proved again that there is no co-ordination between Donetsk and Luhansk if policies are not ordered from Moscow. Thus, while the “DNR” introduced a lockdown on 19 March 2020, the “LNR” waited another eleven days until it introduced restrictions. And during the second wave in autumn, the “LNR” kept the crossing point in Stanytsia Luhanska open, prompting the “DNR” to close its “border” with the “LNR”, much to the detriment of the latter (Newsletters 73 and 81).

Both “Republics” published daily case and fatality numbers, some of which seem highly dubious. None could be independently verified. The separatists did admit a severe shortage of tests. But their blatant censorship and dishonesty became obvious when prominent figures died of “pneumonia” and separatist leaders and official media failed to link a single death to the pandemic.

As of 21 March 2021, the “DNR” reported 27,807 cases and 2,178 deaths from COVID-19.¹⁹ Assuming a real population of 1,1 million (see demographics below), this translates into 25,279 cases and 1,980 deaths per 1 million inhabitants – a higher cumulative death rate than the hardest-hit European countries like Britain, Italy and Spain.²⁰ By comparison, Ukraine had reported 1.5 million cases and almost 30,000 deaths in the same period, which translates into some 36,000 cases and 710 deaths per 1 million. However, Ukraine on average tests less than 1 in 1,000 inhabitants on a rolling 7-day average - much less than other European countries, including Russia. The massive test deficit is to blame for the high share of positive tests, which surged over 20 per cent in January 2021.²¹

While Ukraine tested little, Donetsk and Luhansk tested even less. “DNR” Health “Minister” Alexander Oprishchenko said in October that the “republic” had capacity for carrying out just 480 tests per day, 320 PCR tests free of charge and another 160 antigen tests for paying patients (Newsletter 82). “DNR” health authorities actually published the positive rate on a daily basis – and regularly reported figures between 20 and 30 per cent (the WHO recommends a positive rate of 5 per cent or less as an indicator of adequate testing). On 17 January 2021, the rate shot up to a staggering 81.5 per cent. Because of the test shortages, the Donetsk Health “Ministry” added “clinically diagnosed” cases every day, i.e. patients with symptoms so strong that testing is deemed unnecessary.

In the week leading up to 21 March 2021, the “Ministry” reported 1,424 cases, more than 200 of which were diagnosed without testing. Not included in these figures are 473 cases of “pneumonia”, which the ministry reported in the course of the same week – many of whom were hospitalized.

LNR numbers look like plain fiction

While the “DNR” retained some credibility in its communication, the figures released by the “LNR” looked like plain fiction. By 21 March 2021 the Luhansk separatists admitted just 3,489 cases and 304 deaths, which, assuming a real population of 700,000, would mean 4,984 cases and 434 deaths per 1 million inhabitants – a fraction of the figures in neighbouring Donetsk.

While the “LNR” COVID-figures were only slightly higher during the worst peak of the pandemic in October, social media were awash with reports of crowded hospitals, shortages of medicine and protective gear and long lines outside pharmacies – in both Luhansk and Donetsk. A number of prominent figures died in these weeks, including the “LNR” top coal manager Vladimir Shatokhin,

the composer of the “republic’s” national anthem Yury Dersky and the “DNR” top intensive care doctor Natalya Smirnova. While Dersky officially died of pneumonia, no cause of death was given for Shatokhin and Smirnova. According to health “minister” Oprishchenko, 30 out of then 349 COVID-deaths were medical workers (see Newsletters 83 and 84).

Despite the dire situation, Russia significantly reduced its official “humanitarian aid” to the People’s Republics”. While Moscow in past years sent twelve aid convoys to Donetsk and Luhansk, only three arrived in 2020. The last, on 17 December, officially delivered medical equipment, but with only one third of previous payloads (Newsletter 85).

Russia sends Sputnik V amid doubts about vaccination speed

The biggest hope to overcome the pandemic was Russia’s “Sputnik V” vaccine. Despite reports about shortages in Russian regions, a first party arrived on 31 January in Donetsk and Luhansk, and the vaccination campaign began the next day, when Pushilin had himself vaccinated on camera. The separatists did not disclose how many doses were delivered, but Pushilin said that the second party, which arrived on 2 March, would consist of roughly 25,000 doses. The Donetsk Health “Ministry” said on 25 February that more than 26,000 people had registered for vaccination.²² On 9 April the “DNR” said that it had vaccinated all of its soldiers – the “DNR” armed formations are believed to number between 15,000 and 20,000.²³

Pushilin said that the “DNR” plans to fully vaccinate one million people by the end of the year – and that this would be sufficient to achieve herd immunity of between 60 and 70 per cent of the population.²⁴ Clearly, deliveries will have to rise significantly to achieve this. If monthly parties continue to number 25,000 doses, it will take 40 months to reach just half of the goal - Sputnik V requires two jabs to be fully effective.

The “LNR” said on 12 March 2021 that just 2,200 people had been fully vaccinated and another 5,800 had received the first shot so far. Unlike Pushilin, Luhansk separatist leader Pasechnik was not among them – nor did he explain why. According to Ukrainian Human Rights activists, Pasechnik himself was sick with COVID-19 in October.²⁵ Health “Minister” Natalia Pashchenko hinted on the pandemic’s disastrous effects in the “LNR” when she said on 5 March that herd immunity could already be reached by autumn because “quite a lot of people” already had COVID-19.²⁶

The Economy

The pandemic’s economic consequences were much more obvious. The immediate drop in demand for coal prompted both “People’s Republics” to hasten the closure of unprofitable mines and to put others under closer state control. Layoffs and continuing wage arrears made an already bad situation worse. However, reports of wider industrial restructuring and the dissolution of the infamous and secretive Vneshtorgservis industrial holding, the South-Ossetian registered company which took the biggest enterprises under its control in 2017, were not confirmed by the publication of this report.

The depth of the crisis was embodied in a televised meeting in Donetsk on 10 April, in which the influential “deputy prime minister” and former Vneshtorgservis CEO Vladimir Pashkov told industry officials that the “DNR” can no longer sell its coal: “We have to learn to feed, teach, heat and heal ourselves – we have to do everything ourselves” (see Newsletter 74).

Later in April, the Luhansk separatists announced a restructuring of their coal sector that included pit closures. Beginning in May, 56 enterprises with a total workforce of 30,000 were regrouped into a state-run company called VostokUgol, which did not have to pay previously accumulated wage arrears (see Newsletter 80). According to the Ukrainian NGO Eastern Human Rights Group, 22 mines were closed in the process and laid off workers were being recruited to work in Russian mines (see Newsletter 84).

The shakeup prompted unprecedented labour unrest in the “LNR”, where desperate miners picketed two coalmines between April and June, demanding unpaid wages. The standoffs at the Nikanor-Novaya mine in Sorynsk and at the Komsomolskaya mine in Antratsyt ended only after the separatist government promised to partially pay back debts while the infamous State Security “Ministry” arrested some of the more recalcitrant strikers. Moreover, during the strike in Antratsyt, the separatists tried to impose an information blockade by cutting off the town’s outside transport links (under the pretext of a spike of COVID-infections) and by blocking websites that were used to rally workers, most notably the Russian vk.com social network (see Newsletter 77).

Vneshtorgservis suffers 45 per cent slump

Russia's coal and metals trade with the "People's Republics" is thought to be dominated by Vneshtorgservis and a Russian company called Gaz-Alians. Both are thought to be controlled by Serhiy Kurchenko, a businessman closely linked to former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, with whom he has been in Russian exile since 2014. Reports by Ukrainian activists and media in 2020 suggested that Vneshtorgservis will be replaced by a new structure, in order to redirect money from Kurchenko's pockets to state coffers. In January 2021, unconfirmed reports claimed that the coal trade was being handed to Viktor Medvedchuk, Ukraine's most prominent pro-Russian politician who is said to enjoy close ties to the Kremlin.²⁷

"LNR" Prime Minister Sergei Kozlov announced in May that Vneshtorgservis assets would be handed to VostokUgol and to a new transnational holding called "Energia Donbassa". However, the implementation of this plan was never confirmed and in early 2021 official media were still labeling key plants like the Yenakiiv and Alchevsk metals factories as branches of Vneshtorgservis. However, in early 2021 Ukrainian media reported that at least two of the holding's ten plants – the Donetsk Metals Factory and the Yasinovsky Coking plant in Makiivka were being transferred to a mysterious company called Korner.²⁸

Vneshtorgservis has been dogged by wage arrears and soaring debt and bore the brunt of the pandemic-induced slump. The "DNR" revenue ministry said in January 2021 that the holding suffered a 45 per cent reduction in exports in 2020, a major contribution to a 26.6 per cent fall in overall exports from the "DNR" in the first eleven months of 2020.²⁹

Coal production shrouded in secrecy

The effects on coal output were hard to gauge because the separatists concealed more and more meaningful numbers. The previously more open "DNR" stopped releasing coal production figures after 4 May, when the official DAN news site reported that 2 million tons were produced in the first four months of 2020 – without saying that this was 1 million tons less than in the same period of 2019. The last available annual production figure in the "DNR" was approximately eight million tons for 2019 (see Newsletter 84). In his annual report to "parliament" in March 2021, Donetsk Energy "Minister" Ruslan Dubovitsky did not reveal any numbers and only listed the opening of new coalfaces.³⁰

In Luhansk, VostokUgol CEO Konstantin Skrypnik announced that the state coal holding wants to produce

10 million tons in 2021. That would require a massive rise compared to 2020, when VostokUgol produced just three million tons in the first 6 months of its existence.³¹ The "LNR" has not released meaningful coal production figures recently, but the Ukrainian publication delo.ua reported in 2019 that the 2018 figure was about 8.5 million tons.

The secrecy can also be explained with the fact, that much of the coal from the "People's Republics" is sold to outside markets via Russia – and that businesses taking part in this risk sanctions by the EU and Ukraine. Ukrainian and international media have uncovered that coal from the "People's Republics" is exported with substantial profits for Russian intermediaries, because they resell at much higher prices than they pay for it. An investigation by the Ukrainian Inforpost.com website found that most of the coal is sold to India, Belarus and Ukraine – after being reclassified as Russian.³²

Abandoned mines pose environmental risks

The closure of coal pits also poses massive environmental risks. Closed mines were flooded with water after the separatists stopped pumping systems that kept them dry. This in turn resulted in falling ground water levels that threaten rivers and lakes. The Tainy Luganskoi Respubliki anonymous Telegram channel published a series of photos between October 2020 and February 2021, that showed dried-up reservoirs, rivers and lakes inside the "LNR".³³

A more serious threat is posed by pollution when waste water from flooded mines spreads acids and heavy metals into the environment. A report by the British organization Conflict and Environment Observatory in April published photos of a discolored lake near Yenakiiv in the "DNR", caused by acid drainage from an abandoned mine. The report warned of risks of drinking water contamination and of radioactive pollution from the nearby Yunkom mine. That abandoned coalmine was the site of an experimental Soviet nuclear explosion in 1979.³⁴

Pensioners' plight exacerbated

Another serious problem posed by the pandemic was the closure of the unofficial border with government-controlled areas. The population inside the "People's Republics" officially consists of more than one million pensioners (see above), 660,000 of which continue to receive Ukrainian pensions in addition to local pensions, according to the government in Kyiv.³⁵ The closure of checkpoints for many months in 2020 meant that many could

not make the trip to pick up payments and/or renew their entitlements.

According to a report released by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in December, the number of crossings between government-controlled and non-government-controlled areas plummeted from 1.1 million per month to less than 300 in the spring. The checkpoints along the Contact Line opened again in the summer, but with severe restrictions. The “DNR” opened just one of four crossing points on two days a week and let only pre-registered residents pass under harsh quarantine rules, resulting in hundreds of people, many of them elderly and/or disabled, being stranded in no-man’s land (see Newsletter 78). The situation was slightly better in the Luhansk region, where the footbridge in Stanytsia Luhanska, the region’s only crossing point, mostly remained open.³⁶

Hopes for improvement were dashed in November, when the “LNR” refused to open two newly finished crossing points in Shchastia and Zolote. “The restrictions on freedom of movement have resulted in the separation of thousands of people from their families, and the loss of access to healthcare, education, pensions and sources of livelihoods”, the OHCHR said.³⁷

Rises for pensioners and public sector workers

As the ailing economy can hardly sustain them, Russia is thought to be the main sponsor of the “People’s Republics”, spending at least two billion euros per year to balance their budgets. A significant portion of this is thought to go into the wages of government and public sector workers, which have seen steady rises over the past two years. In 2021, pensioners and public sector were promised steep rises – 34 per cent for pensioners (17 per cent on 1 January and another 17 per cent on 1 July) and between 26 (“DNR”) and 58 per cent (in the “LNR”) for public sector workers.³⁸ In early 2021, the average wage for utility and maintenance workers in Donetsk was 9,947 roubles (110 euros), an average pension was 8,600 roubles (95 euros) according to the official DAN news site.³⁹

In a sign that Russian subsidies may well go down, separatist officials called for increased state revenues in early 2021. Tatyana Pereverzeva, a deputy „prime minister” overseeing the “DNR” budget said in March that the government’s main task in 2021 would be increasing tax revenues.⁴⁰

Human Rights and Society

The human rights situation inside the “People’s Republics” remained deplorable. As more and more details became known about an infamous detention centre in Donetsk, more critics and supporters of the separatist regime vanished and were seemingly arrested by the notorious State Security “Ministry”, better known by its Russian acronym MGB.

The most prominent victim in 2020 was Donetsk-based blogger, former journalist and political scientist Roman Manekin, whose arrest was confirmed on 28 December. The “DNR” MGB said that it suspected Manekin of espionage after a public spat between him and journalist and former MGB prisoner Stanislav Aseyev. Manekin, a pro-Russian intellectual and long-standing critic of the separatist leadership, has been detained numerous times before but was always released shortly after, presumably because of his good connections in both Moscow and Donetsk (see Newsletter 86). There had been no news from him by the time of publication.

Also presumably detained were two prominent backers of the “DNR” regime, apparently on embezzlement and extortion charges.

Maxim Leshchenko, a former chief of staff to slain separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko, was arrested during an Interior Ministry sting operation against corrupt officials at Voda Donbassa, video footage of which was published on 28 December.⁴¹ The Russian Moskovsky Komsomolets newspaper reported the next day that Leshchenko was among those detained. He had been CEO of the separatist-controlled water utility company.⁴²

The other victim was Roman Troshin, a prominent ally of separatist leader Pushilin. Troshin, a former kickboxing champion, headed the People’s Guard, a volunteer force modeled after Russian and Soviet self-defence groups, which acted as “titushki” – brutal thugs who intimidate opposition protests.

The detainees’ situation was highlighted by Aseyev, who has written about systematic torture and abuse in the “Izolatsia” detention centre, located in a former Donetsk factory with the same name. On 27 January, he published a series of photos showing prison cells and interrogation rooms.⁴³ The aforementioned OHCHR report criticized that “the situation of persons in places of detention remained particularly precarious during the pandemic given that many detention facilities are overcrowded”.

Indoctrination of children

Ukrainian prosecutors and rights activists also pointed to the growing indoctrination and militarization of children. Ukraine's Prosecutor General in February 2021 opened a criminal case against military and patriotic clubs in the "DNR" that prepare minors for combat. They include so-called Yunarmia or "Youth Army" formations, which were raised 2019 in both Donetsk and Luhansk. The Kharkiv Human Rights Group has described these formations as children's armies to militarize childhood.⁴⁴

The fundamental absence of freedoms, access to justice and respect for human rights let the "People's Republics" sink further in international rankings. The latest Freedom in the World Report, published by the US-based NGO Freedom House in March 2021, awarded them just 4 out of 100 points, one less than the year before, and ranked them just above North Korea and Turkmenistan.⁴⁵

Census censored?

The "People's Republics" continued to suffer from labour shortages and brain drain. Hopes to get a better picture of their real population were dashed in autumn 2020, when the "LNR" said that the much-anticipated results of a census carried out in 2019 will be published only by the end of the year, while the "DNR" said they would come out by the end of March 2021.⁴⁶ By the time of this report's publication in April 2021, no figures had been released—prompting speculation that the separatists were afraid to disclose the dramatic fall in the local population.⁴⁷

A comparison of birth figures with those in Ukraine suggests that the "republics" have a joint population of hardly 1.8 million – 1.1 million in the "DNR" and 700,000 in the "LNR" (see Newsletter 83). Official birth statistics also showed a linear downward trend in both Donetsk and Luhansk. Figures released in December by the "DNR" suggest 8573 newborn babies – roughly 1,000 less than 2019. In 2018 the figure was 10,655. In the "LNR", the number of births was projected at 5570 in 2020, down from 6,000 in 2019 and 6,500 in 2018 (see Newsletter 85).

Security

2020 was marked by what was probably the most significant fall in violence since the conflict began in 2014. The number of ceasefire violations dropped from close to 10,000 per fortnight to less than 500 after the Trilateral Contact Group brokered a new truce in July (see Newsletter 80). Central ingredients to the seven-point "measures to strengthen the ceasefire" are the introduction of disciplinary actions and a notification mechanism for ceasefire violations via the Group, which consists of Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE.⁴⁸

The number of Ukrainian soldiers killed during the year 2020 was consequently much lower than in previous years. 50 servicepeople were killed and another 339 injured, according to Defence Ministry figures reported by Radio Liberty's Ukrainian service in January.⁴⁹ Thus, military losses almost halved compared to 2019, when the number of killed soldiers was just under 100. As in past years, the "LNR" did not report military casualty figures, but the "DNR" did: According to separatist Ombuds-woman Daria Morozova, 39 fighters were killed in the first eleven months of 2020 – less than any year since 2014. Morozova's figure for 2019 was 149.⁵⁰

However, the number of civilian casualties fell only slightly. The OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission recorded 23 deaths and 105 injuries for the whole of 2020 – four more deaths and 23 injuries less than in 2019.⁵¹ The figures of 2019 were already the lowest since the conflict began in 2014.

While hostile troops continued to be stationed opposite each other along the 457 km long "Contact Line", three disengagement areas, where troops must be drawn back two kilometres each, remained on paper as agreed at the Paris "Normandy Four" summit in December 2019. While the first such area, Stanytsia Luhanska, was largely quiet, violations by the presence of troops or even by firing were occasional in Zolote and frequent in Petrivske, according to the OSCE.⁵²

As in previous years, limited escalations with artillery and rocket launchers can occur at any time. A full-scale military escalation in which one side crosses the contact line remains unlikely, because the military calculus remains the same: Ukraine is deterred from re-taking the areas it

lost by Russia's overwhelming firepower (most of which is stationed just outside of Ukraine), while Russia is deterred by the prospect of more sanctions, more costs and more volatility inside newly seized Ukrainian territory.

Kyiv admits killing "LNR" commander

In an unexpected development, Ukraine admitted that it assassinated a senior separatist military commander in 2017. Oleg Anashchenko, who headed the "People's Militia" of the "LNR" at the time, was killed by a Ukrainian commando, Serhiy Krivonos, a deputy secretary of Ukraine's Security and Defence Council, said in October 2020. Krivonos explained that two soldiers carried out the plot successfully but were subsequently captured by the separatists. They returned home only after a hostage swap in December 2019.⁵³

Anashchenko was killed in February 2017, when a bomb exploded underneath his car in Luhansk. The "LNR" later sentenced 16 Ukrainian servicemen and women to long prison sentences for the incident (see Newsletters 58 and 19). It was not clear, whether the other 14 Ukrainians were also swapped in 2019. The separatists have routinely blamed Ukrainian "agents" (diversanty in Russian) for numerous high-profile killings in the areas they control. However, while many of the killed field commanders had fallen out with their superiors in Donbas and/or Moscow, there had been no indication that Anashchenko ever had conflicted with his leaders.

Conclusion

As the geopolitical standoff between Russia and the West is worsening, a solution in the Donbass conflict is becoming more and more difficult. The longer Russia is intent to sustain the "People's Republics" as bargaining chips and propaganda tools, the lesser the hopes of Ukraine and her allies to restore the country's territorial integrity.

Ukraine's ongoing efforts to counter Russia's propaganda war have not shown results so far. In 2020, it built a new mast to broadcast radio and TV signals across the Contact Line in the Luhansk region and continued to develop the Russian-language Dom TV channel.⁵⁴

But a survey by the Kyiv Institute of Sociology and Russian firm Levada Marketing Research released in February 2021 found that attitudes about the conflict's possible solution now differ strongly on each side of the Contact Line: More than 50 per cent of respondents in government-con-

trolled areas said that the separatist areas should be returned to Ukraine without any autonomy, almost 20 per cent said that they should be returned with autonomy. By contrast, well over 50 per cent of respondents in the "People's Republics" said that they want to join Russia, either with or without some autonomous status. Only less than 10 per cent of respondents in the "People's Republics" said that they want independence.⁵⁵

Hopes that the rising cost of keeping the "People's Republics" afloat will prompt a rethinking in Moscow have not materialized. With a GDP of 1.7 trillion dollars and a federal budget of 300 billion dollars, Russia can afford to continue subsidizing the separatists, estimated at between 2.5 and 1.5 billion dollars per annum. While there are signs that Dmitry Kozak, the Kremlin's new point man for eastern Ukraine, is pressurizing the separatist to reduce wasteful spending and generate more income, a policy shift that would make reintegration with Ukraine a real option seems further away than ever.

Moreover, Moscow continues to cement the status quo. Relentless anti-Ukrainian propaganda, a tight police state and military and political indoctrination especially in schools and universities are making it harder every year to imagine a return of Donetsk and Luhansk to Ukraine. Western analysts are already saying that the "People's Republics" are heading for de facto annexation by Russia.⁵⁶

Sources

Ukrainian Media

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

Media from the “DNR”

- Donetskoe Agentstvo Novostei (DAN) <http://dan-news.info/> The official “DNR” news site, thought to be close to separatist leader Pushilin. Reliable, but publishes only a highly restrictive range of officially-sanctioned news.
- The “Official site of the People’s Republic” <http://dnr-online.ru/> Run by the Information “Ministry”, the site combines text and video reports and contains official lists of “ministries” decrees and the “DNR” constitution.
- Website of Denis Pushilin <https://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 Tsentri (LITs) <http://lug-info.com/> The “LNR” official news site, generally less informative than the “DNR” sites.
- Website of Leonid Pasechnik: <https://glava-lnr.info/> The “LNR” leader’s site contains official information, including decrees and the constitution.
- “State television” GTRK <https://gtrklnr.com/> The official “LNR” TV station produces markedly less content than its “DNR” equivalents
- Istok News Agency <http://miaistok.su/> apparently run by the youth wing of the ruling Peace for Lugansk movement. Rarely differs from LITs.

Russian Media

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

International Media

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

Endnotes

- 1 This report widely quotes the regular Newsletters which are published as part of the “Civic Monitoring” project throughout the year. Instead of endnotes, the relevant number is added to each quotation. Readers can open them at <https://civicmonitoring.org/>, click on a Newsletter and switch to another one by changing the number in the URL, eg <https://civicmonitoring.org/newsletter83/>
- 2 <https://civicmonitoring.org/newsletter71/>
- 3 <https://civicmonitoring.org/report2019/>
- 4 <https://www.rferl.org/a/in-first-interview-since-departure-russia-s-former-gray-cardinal-questions-existence-of-ukraine/30456301.html>
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- 7 Pirogova, a former Donetsk “Information Ministry” official, was convicted in absentia by a court in the western Ukrainian city of Chernivtsi in 2018: <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/309780-polytpodgruppa-tkg-ushla-napereryv-yz-uchastyaya-pryglashennykh-separatystamy-ehkspertov>
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- 13 Simonyan: <https://youtu.be/9aFnLJeKfY> Putin: <https://youtu.be/nDMJ4XVwxI4>
- 14 Putin: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65174> Pushilin: <https://denis-pushilin.ru/news/denis-pushilin-rossiya-pobezhdaet-i-vozvrashtaet-svoi-territorii-kotorye-byli-otorvany-lozhyu-obmanom-vojnnoj-i-manipulyatsiyami/>
- 15 <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/756135>
- 16 <https://sovminlr.ru/sostav-ministrov/19-ministerstvo-promyshlennost-luganskoy-narodnoy-respubliki.html> and <https://t.me/TLRes/701>
- 17 <https://glavcom.ua/ru/think/ukrainskiy-moshennik-i-prestupnik-rushchak-stal-ministrom-promyshlennosti-dnr-668962.html>
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- 21 See “Our World in Data” https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?zoomToSelection=true&time=47.423&pickerSort=desc&pickerMetric=new_cases_per_million&Metric=Tests&Interval=7-day+rolling+average&Relative+to+Population=true&Align+outbreaks=false&country=USA~GBR~DEU~UKR~RUS
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- 52 In its Status Report from 11 January 2021 (Note 44), the OSCE Mission observed “people inside (Zolote and Petrivske) during daytime hours and recorded ceasefire violations inside the area near Petrivske for the first time since August 2020.”
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The year 2020 in the Donbas was overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which by all accounts hit the “People’s Republics” hard but whose exact impact is hard to gauge, given the notorious secrecy of the separatist de facto authorities. More discernible was the pandemic’s economic effect which resulted in what is probably the severest downturn since 2014. However, despite serious labour unrest, growing wage arrears and the exodus of skilled workers, separatist leaders faced no serious challenges to their rule. Protected by a ruthless security apparatus, they continued to implement policies that deepen the rift between the separatist entities and the rest of Ukraine. There also was almost no noticeable effect from the ouster of Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov, whose responsibilities for eastern Ukraine were taken over by his rival Dmitry Kozak in February. Surkov is widely believed to have been the key Russian official who set up and ran the “People’s Republics” since 2014.

While security significantly improved thanks to the adherence to a renewed ceasefire brokered on 22 July, the overall situation remained volatile as some 80,000 troops remain stationed on both sides of the Contact Line. The massive deployment of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border and in Crimea in spring 2021 reminded the world that military escalation is also possible. The human rights situation inside the “People’s Republics” remained dismal - both critics and public supporters of the separatists risk detention and torture – and access to justice is practically not existent. Another serious problem that worsened in 2020 is the environmental crisis posed by the flooding of unused coalmines after the separatist stopped pumping water out of them.

This year’s annual report covers the year 2020 and the first three months of 2021.

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