

The Russian Statelets in the Donbas Are No “People’s Republics”

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Vladimir Putin claims to be defending populations in the Donbas. In fact, the Kremlin-controlled statelets there are dominated by military rule and repression of organized labor – a troubling indicator of the future Putin has in store for neighboring regions.

Vera Iastrebova, a Donetsk lawyer and labor movement activist, [reported](#) on social media on February 26 that mothers and wives in the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” were desperately seeking ways to protect their menfolk from compulsory mobilization in the now-unfolding war.

“They call and say that the men are being taken from the [coal] mines and sent straight to the front, even though they have no military experience,” Iastrebova wrote.

Earlier in the week, activists in Ukrainian government-controlled territory had heard from their comrades in the “republics” that, since their militia had not conscripted sufficient soldiers, the over-fifty-fives were being called up.

Such realities stand in bleak contrast to the Kremlin’s rhetoric about the statelets as bastions of opposition to a “Nazi” regime.

The areas, known in Russian as Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika (DNR) and Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika (LNR), comprise the eastern part of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions respectively; the western parts have remained under Ukrainian government control even after 2014. Despite the “people’s republic” names, they have routinely intimidated organized labor and political dissidents, institutionalized violence, and trampled on human rights. They have also presided over the collapse of industry and a catastrophic fall in living standards.

The harsh conditions normalized since these statelets were founded in 2014 are not an exact guide to how Russian-supported forces, or Russia itself, might administer other parts of Ukraine if they take them over by force. But the misery heaped on the population of these “people’s republics” across the last eight years does give some indications.

Here, I shall focus first on the preparations for President Vladimir Putin’s announcement on February 21 that Russia recognizes the “republics,” followed on February 24 by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. I then outline how the “republics” economies, politics, and labor movements have changed since their creation eight years ago.

The Run-Up to Recognition

By the end of the 2014–15 war in Eastern Ukraine, extreme Russian nationalists’ aspirations to establish the state of Novorossiia, comprising Ukraine’s six southeastern regions, had been abandoned. Putin had referred to the idea in speeches in 2014 but then shelved it. The two “people’s

republics” were to remain separate from each other and from Russia.

The Minsk II agreement of 2015 required Ukraine to decentralize and armed formations to withdraw, but [neither happened](#), and at first Moscow appeared content to leave these statelets as they were, a thorn in the side of the Ukrainian state.

The first sign that the Kremlin’s policy was shifting toward recognition and/or integration was the drive, kick-started by two presidential decrees in mid-2019, to grant Russian citizenship to Russian-speaking Ukrainians, both in the “republics” and in Ukrainian-controlled territory. More than 800,000 passports have now been distributed — equivalent to more than one-third of the statelets’ remaining adult population.

A report by the [Eastern Human Rights Group](#) (EHRG), founded by trade union activists displaced from Donetsk to Ukrainian-controlled territory, concluded that “passportization” was part of a drive toward “permanent [Russian] control” of the “republics.” It went with militarization (specifically, the introduction of “military-patriotic” education in schools and sports clubs) and integration of the education system with Russia’s.

Prior to the 2021 [parliamentary election](#) in Russia, residents of the “republics” were encouraged to vote online or bused to polling stations in the Rostov region of Russia. Halya Coynash of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group [reported](#) that residents were being “enrolled en masse” into United Russia (UR), the dominant, pro-Putin party in the Russian parliament.

On Election Day last year, Dmitry Sablin, a leading UR parliamentarian, arrived in Donetsk and [announced](#) that an experiment was underway in “uniting this territory with Russia.” A barrage of similar sound-bites led observers to believe that the Kremlin was considering annexation, rather than recognition, of the “republics.”

The way for UR’s propaganda offensive had been paved by the Russian parliament’s loyal opposition parties, A Just Russia — for Truth (Spravedlivaya Rossiya — Za Pravdu, SRZP) and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), whose representatives had travelled to Donbas regularly since 2015. Sergey Mironov, former chairman of the Russian parliament’s upper house and leader of A Just Russia, a nominally social democratic but fiercely nationalist party, was an early [advocate](#) of integration of the “republics” with Russia. And it was CPRF deputies that last month made the motion in the Russian parliament — which UR then supported — urging Putin to recognize the “republics.” Two CPRF deputies have since protested against the war itself.

The promotion of the “Russian world” — which, in Putin’s view, includes swaths of Ukraine and other former Soviet states, as well as Russia itself — has a vicious side: the “republics” set their violent, arbitrary law enforcement agencies on Ukrainian speakers and supporters of the Ukrainian government. Top of [a list](#) of assaults on freedom of expression in 2019–21, compiled by the United Nations’ human rights agency, was the 13.5-year jail sentence handed to a Luhansk businessman who publicly expressed pro-Ukrainian views.

Three men arrested in 2020, for singing songs in Ukrainian, praising the Kiev government, and criticizing the Luhansk authorities, were still locked up without trial when the report was published in October 2021. The Luhansk “people’s republic” does not share information with the UN, and so their whereabouts remained unknown.

The slide toward integration has also heaped tragedy on residents of the “republics” who need to travel to Ukrainian government-controlled territory, including many social benefits recipients. Most crossing points across the separation line were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Local

transport operators started offering trips via Russian territory; Ukrainian border officials were [fining](#) many people who made these journeys, until protests by community activists got the law changed.

From Powerhouse to Wasteland

The Donbas (i.e., the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, of which the “republics” occupy parts) was, historically, a renowned center of coal mining, steelmaking, and chemicals production.

As Ukraine recovered from the disastrous economic slump that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Donbas economy leaned increasingly on exports of steel, coal, and railway locomotives. Russia remained its largest market. Other regions’ economies grew faster, benefiting in some cases from newer industries and services. But the 2014–15 war, and the division of the Donbas that followed, uprooted its population and trashed its industrial base.

By 2021, the war had claimed an estimated 14,000 lives, of which about four thousand were civilians, and left an estimated 30,000 injured. It dispersed much of the population of the Donbas: of a prewar population of 6.6 million, an estimated 3.3 million people have fled their homes. Of these, 1.8 million have been living as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine and 1.5 million in Russia and Belarus. Whole towns and villages have been emptied of their populations.

And even before the Russian invasion this year, the UN [categorized](#) the Donbas as one of the world’s most mine-contaminated areas in the world.

In the first four years of conflict (2014–17), Donbas’s economy shrunk by 61 percent, the economist Vlad Mykhnenko [found](#) — largely due to “rapid and severe deindustrialization.” Luhansk’s industrial output fell by more than four-fifths, and Donetsk’s by half. Dozens of mines have closed and flooded, while small-scale, informal coal production has been *de facto* legalized. Steel works and manufacturing capacity lie idle.

Foreign trade collapsed, with Luhansk’s grinding almost to a halt and Donetsk’s falling by nearly two-thirds. What remains of the statelets’ economy is closely linked to Russia’s, and the ruble has been the main currency since 2015.

Living standards have crashed. Mykhnenko showed that in 2017 average wages in the Donetsk “people’s republic” were \$174/month (38 percent of the pre-2014 level) and in the Luhansk “republic” \$229/month (56 percent of the pre-2014 level). Nonpayment of wages is endemic.

Unemployment in the government-controlled parts of Donbas was 14–16 percent in 2018. No statistics were available for the “people’s republics,” but the level is similar. At the same time, there is a shortage of skilled labor, including medical staff, mine workers, and educators. Skilled workers leave if they can, a [survey](#) by the EHRG showed: labor migration to Russia is encouraged by the authorities.

Before 2014, much of Donbas heavy industry was controlled by the SKM financial group, whose owner, Rinat Akhmetov, is one of Ukraine’s richest politically influential businessmen (oligarchs). In February 2017, Ukrainian nationalists linked to Igor Kolomoisky, a competing oligarch, blockaded exports of Akhmetov’s coal from the “republics” to Ukraine. The action was [opposed](#) by organized labor.

The separatists’ armed forces responded by seizing Akhmetov’s assets, and — despite some rhetoric about “nationalization” — handed them to Vneshtorgservis (VTS), a company registered in South Ossetia, a Russian-occupied enclave in Georgia, and controlled by Serhiy Kurchenko, a billionaire linked to former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich. (In mid-2021, Kurchenko was [replaced](#) by

Yevgeny Yurchenko.)

The cooperation between VTS and the political and military leadership of the “people’s republics,” as well as Russian elite circles, goes far beyond a “revolving-door” effect. Most observers see them as inseparable.

The sociologist Serhiy Kudelia [wrote](#) in 2017, “In reality, the ‘republics’ are beginning to acquire the features of a military bureaucratic regime, in which military personnel and officials dominate society through coercion and the monopolisation of the distribution of wealth.”

The economic disaster in the “people’s republics” cannot be attributed to their political leaderships alone; it is largely the product of war and recession. But it is a terrible fact of twenty-first-century capitalism that the economy could have been turned around, and the transition to new types of industry begun, with only a fraction of the resources that the Russian state is now plunging in to laying waste to Ukraine.

Labor and Authoritarian Control

The militarized authorities in the “people’s republics” have drastically cut down space for social and political activity. A [UN report](#) concluded that there is no public discussion of “more sensitive political topics” due to “fear and self-censorship” and that protests over economic conditions, such as strikes, face “serious consequences, including arbitrary detention.”

Despite the statelets’ name, real popular involvement in politics faces sharp institutional limits. In the Donetsk “people’s republic,” military authorities in 2014 introduced a “nonparty democracy” (!). The “people’s council” wields political power and allows one legal party, the Communist Party of the Donetsk People’s Republic — although it excluded Communist Party representatives from its own ranks in 2016. Parliament is dominated by two “social movements,” with a high proportion of military commanders in their ranks. The researcher Kimitaka Matsuzato [has shown](#) how Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin power broker, worked with Donetsk officials to put the system together.

Organized workers’ action has been extremely rare in the “republics.” The most well-known [action](#) of recent years was an underground sit-in by 119 mine workers, over months’ worth of unpaid wages, at the Komsomolskaya mine in Antratsyt. Fourteen activists were arrested under article 252 of the statelet’s criminal code, which penalizes “repeated breach of established order, organization or conduct of assemblies, meetings, demonstrations, marches or pickets” with up to five years in prison. The dispute ended when they were released, and part of the outstanding wages were paid.

The public intimidation of civil society is backed up by a less transparent system of torture, humiliation, and forced labor in military prisons. The journalist [Stanislav Aseyev](#), who spent thirty-one months in custody in Donetsk in 2017–19 and was released in a prisoner exchange, [documented](#) physical torture (electric shock treatment and beating of the genitals), rape of men and women, and other mistreatment, of himself and others.

The trade union activists of EHRG [exposed](#) the use of slave labor in Luhansk prisons in a 2016 [report](#). Prisoners convicted under Ukrainian law before 2014 found themselves at the mercy of an extralegal regime that put prisoners to work in joinery and metalworking shops, and other production, without pay.

Prisoners who refused to work were severely beaten by armed, masked men; kept in solitary confinement with no food or water for three days; and forced by the threat of beating to stand for eight to ten hours in the burning sun. When prisoners protested collectively, guards called special detachments from the statelet’s internal affairs ministry to attack them.

Trade union activists and human rights defenders have mostly left the “people’s republics,” after a crackdown in 2014; those who stayed keep “low profiles in fear of persecution,” the [UN report](#) stated. Women’s rights organizations and support groups for victims of domestic violence, too, operate in the shadows.

Groups that have organized in the Ukrainian-controlled parts of the Donbas, and supported social movements in the “republics” when opportunities have arisen, include:

- The EHRG, which has supported independent worker organization. Pavel Lisiansky, a lawyer with EHRG and former miners’ union official, [said](#) in a 2017 interview that the union structures approved by the “republics” had been “formed to control workers.” Worker militants in the “republics” have “no law, no rights, people are defenceless.”
- The pacifist group [Black Days of Donbas](#), set up by Enrike Menendez (a Donbas citizen of Spanish heritage). It demands that the Ukrainian government name a day to remember the civilian deaths of the war in Eastern Ukraine.
- [Women’s organizations](#), including: the Women’s Human Rights Group, formed in 2017 by Irina Nikulnikova, a lawyer, in response to anger over unpaid wages at the coal company Lisichanskugol; a group started by Vera Iastrebova that staged a march for women’s rights on International Women’s Day in 2018 at Lisichansk; and the Civil Inspection of Labor group, formed in 2014 in Debaltsevo to defend labor rights, social and economic rights, and women’s rights.

The Donbas “people’s republics” have, throughout their existence, been politically and militarily supported by the Russian government. Their economies are closely tied to Russia’s. Should Russia retain control of other parts of Ukraine, elements of this type of rule may be replicated.

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