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Annual Report on the Events in the »People's Republics« of Eastern Ukraine 2017

Civic monitoring of certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk Region



Imprint

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Foreword

Four years after the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine, the armed conflict remains in stalemate. The terrible conditions for Ukrainians living in the conflict zone have not improved in 2017 and the political tensions that prevent a lasting diplomatic solution remain. Understanding the current situation requires an analysis of what is happening within the self-declared »people's republics«, that remain largely inaccessible to independent journalists and observers. With the aim of contributing to greater transparency regarding the developments in eastern Ukraine, the project »Human Rights Monitoring in Eastern Ukraine« presents this new analysis, compiled by Nikolaus von Twickel.

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Summary

Those hoping that eastern Ukraine's Russian-controlled »people's republics« may soon return to their homeland suffered significant setbacks last year. The trade blockade and the ensuing seizure of industrial assets hammered another wedge between them and the rest of Ukraine, while separatist hardliners triumphed in Luhansk, ousting local separatist leader Igor Plotnitsky in November. The security situation did not improve either: Government troops and separatist formations continued to move closer to each other, while seasonal swings of violence (e.g. a peak in August, followed by a sharp drop at the beginning of the school year) mirrored those of previous years.

The blockade and ensuing economic separation only emboldened the so-called separatists in their calls for unification with Russia, despite occasional pledges that they continue to adhere to the Minsk agreement, which stipulates reintegration with Ukraine.

Security	4
Politics	5
Human Rights	7
Economy	7
Outlook	9
Chronology of developments in the »People's Republics« for 2017	10
Sources	12

Security

As in the previous years, the fighting was confined to areas along the 500 kilometer-long »contact line« that divides the government-controlled areas from those controlled by the separatists. However, 2017 began with an intense outbreak of violence at the end of January in and around Avdiivka, when more than 30 soldiers and seven civilians were killed and the OSCE recorded¹ more than 10,000 explosions in a single day, the highest number since the outbreak of the conflict in 2014 (see Newsletter 18²).

While the blame is very hard to assign, many observers linked January's escalation to the first phone calls of newly elected US President Donald Trump with the leaders of Russia and Ukraine – which implies that the sides provoked violence in order to add urgency to the talks.

The Ukrainian side also continued to move its troops closer to the contact line, taking up new positions and entering »grey zone« settlements previously controlled by no one. One such advance in June stopped just before the village of Zholobok in the Luhansk area, and in November the Ukrainians seized control of the villages Hladosove and Travneve in the Donetsk region.³ These tactics result in the hostile parties standing closer to each other, which in turn makes firefights and other violence more likely.

Throughout the year, the OSCE Monitoring Mission recorded 401,336 ceasefire violations, a 25 per cent increase over 2016, when it recorded 320,130 (the Mission is constantly expanding its monitoring capacities, including the installation of 24-hour cameras, so some of the increase might be due to better reporting).⁴ The Ukrainian armed forces said⁵ that 191 soldiers were killed between January 1 and December 18, slightly less than in 2016, when at least 211 soldiers were killed.⁶ As in previous years, no reliable figures are available for the separatist side.

The OSCE also recorded⁷ the deaths of 85 civilians up to mid-December, compared to 83 in 2016.⁸

A massive threat to civilian lives is presented by land mines, which both parties have laid along the contact line. The United Nations warned in October that eastern Ukraine »is rapidly becoming one of the most mined areas in the world.«⁹

The growing mine hazard was highlighted in April, when an OSCE patrol vehicle drove over an anti-tank mine on a separatist-controlled road in the Luhansk region, killing an American paramedic working for the Mission (see Newsletter 21¹⁰). An internal investigation by the organization concluded that the mine was not planted to target the OSCE.¹¹ However, the incident prompted the Mission to introduce stricter security rules, which resulted in reduced patrolling.

The OSCE Mission, which has some 600 unarmed monitors in eastern Ukraine, suffered another serious setback in December, when Russia withdrew its officers from the Joint Centre for Control and Co-ordination (JCCC)¹², citing unbearable work conditions imposed by Ukraine.¹³ The centre, which consisted of Russian and Ukrainian officers, served as the main institution through which local ceasefires could be brokered in short time, e.g. to allow repair works of civilian infrastructure. The JCCC's demise further reduces the mission's ability to enter areas deemed unsafe.

On the day of withdrawal's completion, December 18, violence promptly broke in government-controlled Novoluhanske, where at least eight people were injured in a Grad missile attack (the separatists claimed that Ukraine attacked Horlivka with similar weapons earlier that day).¹⁴

The disengagement agreement of 2016, the single success of the ongoing Minsk negotiations since the 2015 agreement, remained partially implemented in Zolote and Petrivske, while there were no signs of it being implemented at all in Stanytsia Luhanska. The agreement stipulates that both sides move both arms and military personnel two kilometres away from the contact line, initially at the three locations mentioned above.

Efforts at the OSCE-moderated talks in the Belarusian capital also failed to achieve the opening of a vehicle crossing point in Zolote. While the Ukrainian side deployed the necessary infrastructure, including containers for customs and passport inspections, the separatists insisted that they would only agree if a similar crossing point is opened in Shchastya, something Ukraine adamantly refuses to do.¹⁵

While experts say that the impasse is really caused by military logic – a crossing point in Zolote is considered to give advantages to government troops, while one in Shchastya would be advantageous for the separatists – the result is that the footbridge in Stanytsia Luhanska remains the only crossing point for civilians in the whole Luhansk Region.

The international debate about ending the conflict centered around a UN peacekeeping force, following remarks by Russian President Vladimir Putin in September that he would welcome such a force if it was to protect the existing OSCE Monitoring Mission and deployed only along the contact line.¹⁶ While these conditions were roundly rejected by Ukraine and its allies, Germany, France and the US continued talks over the idea, not least because it offers a perspective to break the deadlock surrounding the Minsk agreement.

Politics

Political violence continued to plague the »people's republics« last year, culminating in an unprecedented putsch in November, when Luhansk separatist leader Igor Plotnitsky was deposed with military help from Donetsk by his »state security« chief and bitter rival Leonid Pasechnik.

Putsch in Luhansk

The power struggle unfolded after Plotnitsky fired »Interior Minister« Igor Kornet, a close ally of Pasechnik, over unspecified criminal charges on November 20.¹⁷ Kornet however, refused to back down. The next day, armed men without insignia roamed the centre of Luhansk, thwarting Plotnitsky's attempt to install a new minister. Kornet went on the offensive, claiming unconvincingly that the »republic« was threatened by Ukrainian conspirators who had infiltrated the highest echelons of power.¹⁸

Plotnitsky managed to publish a video address, in which he accused Kornet of plotting to overthrow his government, but it was already clear that he had lost as no one came out to defend him on the streets.¹⁹ On November 23, an undated video surfaced showing Plotnitsky at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport, accompanied by reports that he had fled to Russia. The next day, Pasechnik declared – without offering any proof – that Plotnitsky had resigned for health reasons and appointed him as successor.²⁰ As of press time for this report, nothing has been seen or heard from the longtime leader of the »LNR«.

The »Pasechnik putsch« highlights the challenges faced by Moscow when it comes to commanding and controlling the »people's republics«. While there is little doubt that Russia has massive leverage, having inspired, actively fueled and armed the separatist movements, the internal quarrels in Luhansk were on the verge of spiraling out of the Kremlin's control.

Plotnitsky, a slick former artillery officer, had long faced corruption allegations (see Newsletter 8²¹) and ostensibly failed to build a power base that was strong enough to fend off his enemies. This must have frustrated Moscow, especially given that the Kremlin is widely believed to have played a role in the assassination of key Plotnitsky opponents like Cossack commander Pavel Dryomov, killed by a car bomb in December 2015.

A long-running conflict

A first dangerous clash between Plotnitsky and Pasechnik was defused in October 2015²², but the conflict resurfaced in November 2017 after Plotnitsky humiliated Kornet by

making him confess in public that he had been living in an illegally seized house.²³ The public rivalry was reinforced by what Ukrainian officials call the »war of the curators« - the fact that the two groups were backed by different factions in Moscow – Pasechnik and Kornet by the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Plotnitsky by President Vladimir Putin's point man for eastern Ukraine, Vladislav Surkov.²⁴

The Kremlin probably sided with Pasechnik when it became clear that Plotnitsky had too little support, especially among the armed forces and security services. By sending forces from the »DNR« to Luhansk (this was confirmed by the Donetsk »State Security Ministry«²⁵), it avoided a potentially risky internal confrontation between the »LNR« army (the »people's militia«) and its nominal commander-in-chief, while at the same time being able to deny any involvement.

Initial speculation that the armed intervention was a prelude to a merger of both »republics« proved insubstantial. Rather, the Kremlin seems happy to keep two sometimes rivalling »governments« and bureaucracies stuck in limbo between Ukraine and Russia – making peace talks more complicated but also paying lip service to the Minsk agreement which stipulates that Ukraine's territorial integrity and make-up must be respected (see Newsletter 25²⁶).

The return of the hardliners

But Pasechnik's triumph over Plotnitsky is not necessarily a good outcome for Moscow. The secretive intelligence officer represents the separatists' ideological wing, which is less inclined for compromise. Members of this group were frequently removed from office in the past like Igor Girkin (aka Strelkov) and Andrei Purgin from Donetsk, Alexei Karyakin and Valery Bolotov from Luhansk.

While Girkin, Purgin and Karyakin subsequently criticized the Kremlin's running of the »people's republics« from exile in Russia, Bolotov, who was Plotnitsky's direct predecessor, died suddenly in January 2017 in Moscow, just two months after returning to public life (see Newsletter 17²⁷). His wife later expressed suspicion that he had drunken poisoned coffee.²⁸

More murders

Whether the conflict between hardliners and pragmatists played a role in last year's two other high-profile assassinations is debatable. On February 4, Oleg Anashchenko, the commander of the »LNR«'s »people's militia« was killed by a car bomb. Four days later, Mikhail Tolstykh, a prominent »DNR« field commander better known under his nom de guerre »Givi«, was killed by a

brazen attacker with a portable rocket launcher in his office in Makiivka.

Ukrainian media initially speculated²⁹ that Plotnitsky had ordered Anashchenko's killing, but Ukraine's Security Service SBU later published an intercepted phone call from January, in which the separatist commander expressed fear that he is being targeted by Pasechnik's people.³⁰

As is their routine, the separatists accused Ukrainian agents of carrying out both attacks. The Luhansk »Security Ministry« even published videos of captured Ukrainian servicemen confessing Anashchenko's murder – which Kiev suggested were made after torture (see Newsletters 18 and 19³¹). »Minister« Pasechnik later suggested that the same Ukrainian special forces' cell was responsible for assassinating »Givi«.³²

Like Donetsk field commander Arsen Pavlov (»Motorola«), who was assassinated in 2016, neither Anashchenko nor Tolstykh had openly quarreled with their separatist leaders. But blaming Ukraine for these killings begs the question why Kiev would launch high-risk operations only to target mid-range commanders.

A war of assassinations?

A string of killings of Ukrainian intelligence officers who had worked in Donbass could, however, bolster the theory of an »assassination war« playing out between Russia and Ukraine. Victims in 2017 include Oleksandr Kharaberyush, a senior counterterrorism officer in the Donetsk Region, killed by a car bomb in Mariupol on March 31. On June 27, two more Ukrainian officers were killed by car bombs – SBU colonel Yuri Vosniy in the Donetsk region and military intelligence officer Maksym Shapoval in Kiev.³³

New Russian minders in Donetsk

As in previous years, the situation in Donetsk appeared to be more stable than in Luhansk. However, there was plenty of evidence of considerable volatility beneath the surface of the bigger and more prosperous »people's republic«.

For one, separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko got two new Russian »minders«. Alexander Kazakov, a political consultant formerly based in Riga, and Zakhar Prilepin, one of Russia's most prominent writers, took up posts as advisers to Zakharchenko at the turn of the year.

If the appointments aimed to make Zakharchenko's public statements less erratic, they were clearly a failure. In fact, Prilepin later took credit for what might be the

»DNR« leader's biggest gaffe so far.³⁴ In July, Zakharchenko surprised many by proclaiming a new state called »Malorossiya« (»Little Russia«) that would replace both the Donetsk and Luhansk »people's republics« plus eventually much of Ukraine.

Among those caught off guard by this announcement was not only the Luhansk separatist leadership but also Denis Pushilin, nominally the »DNR's« second most powerful leader, and, presumably, even Kremlin officials. Consequently, Zakharchenko backed away from his own words and admitted one month later that the idea had created too much opposition (see Newsletter 23³⁵).

Following the »Malorossiya« affair, Ukrainian media in September carried rumours that Russia was planning to replace both Zakharchenko and Plotnitsky.³⁶ However, nothing like this materialize, and on October 16 Zakharchenko even made a rare public occurrence with Surkov, when the two opened a monument to fallen volunteers in the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don.³⁷

Maybe bolstered by the meeting with Surkov, Zakharchenko announced two days later that he will stand for re-election in November 2018. More importantly, he ousted Denis Pushilin as executive officer of »Donetsk Republic«, the quasi governing party that would provide political backing in an election. Pushilin had notably been absent from the meeting in Rostov, as was Plotnitsky.

In another suspicious event, »DNR« income »minister« Alexander Timofeyev, thought to be the most powerful figure in Donetsk after Zakharchenko, claimed on September 23 that he survived an assassination attempt when a roadside bomb exploded next to his car (see Newsletter 24³⁸). Zakharchenko, too, claimed that an assassination attempt against him had been foiled during a memorial event at a World War II monument on May 8.³⁹

No return to Ukraine's »ruins«

Political differences aside, separatist leaders in both Luhansk and Donetsk continued to proclaim that they were seeking »integration« with Russia while only paying lip service to the Minsk agreement, which stipulates integration with Ukraine. This did not only play out in the seizure of Ukrainian-owned plants (see the section on the economy), but in declaration of »foreign policy«.

»LNR« leader Plotnitsky declared at least twice in 2017 that his »republic« won't return to Ukraine and instead seek closer ties with Russia. The first time, during an event in January in Crimea, he argued that the people of Donbass had voted to live outside Ukraine in the referendum of May

2014 (widely criticized as illegal). The second time, during a TV talk show in November, he explained the only path forward was to Russia because Ukraine was in ruins: «The Ukraine that was before the war is no longer ... There is no economy, no state, and national unity ceased long ago .. there are only Nazis and Banderovtsi (supporters of wartime Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera)».⁴⁰

Plotnitsky went on to claim that the Minsk agreement is about building a new Ukraine: »Only if this has been built, and our people want it and we have carried out a referendum, then this will happen,« he said. Needless to say, the Minsk Agreement does nowhere talk about a »building a new Ukraine«.

The separatists received another minor boost in February, when Russian President Vladimir Putin decreed that Russia would recognize their documents like passports and birth certificates. While Putin's decree sticks to the language of Minsk, mentioning only documents issued to Ukrainian citizens »permanently residing in certain districts of Ukraine's Donetsk and Lugansk regions«, it made travel to Russia easier for those whose Ukrainian documents have expired.

Germany criticized the move as »a clear breach of the Minsk Agreement's spirit and aims«. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, on the other hand, justified it as a humanitarian gesture, arguing that the people affected faced growing difficulties in Russia (see Newsletter 19⁴¹).

Human Rights

The human rights situation in the people's republics continued to raise serious concerns. There were numerous reports of groundless and arbitrary detentions, the abuse or even torture of prisoners and for unjustifiably harsh sentences being handed down by separatist authorities.

On March 10, the »State Security Ministry« in Luhansk published two videos, in which visibly abused looking captured Ukrainian servicemen »confess« their roles in the February 4 assassination of »LNR« military commander Oleg Anashchenko.

Ukraine rejected the confessions, saying that the two soldiers went missing on 11 February, one week after Anashchenko's death. The intelligence service SBU said that the captured soldiers showed signs of torture and that their confessions were clearly made under duress (see Newsletter 19⁴²).

Both republics displayed a tendency to blame and arrest people for being »Ukrainian agents« without publishing any evidence of the existence of fair judicial proceedings.

Blogger and freelance journalist Stanislav Aseyev (aka Vasin) vanished in Donetsk in early June and is believed to be held by the »DNR's« secretive »State Security Ministry«, known by its Russian acronym »MGB«. Human Rights Watch, which documented this case, accused the separatists of holding forcibly disappeared civilians in custody for weeks without any contact with the outside world and subjecting them to ill-treatment.⁴³

In Luhansk, a secret military court in July sentenced blogger Eduard Nedelyayev to 14 years in prison for allegedly inciting hatred against Russians and spying for a foreign country.⁴⁴ Nedelyayev, who was arrested in 2016 after writing critical entries about the »LNR« in social media, was lucky to be released in December's big prisoner swap. Not so Aseyev, who remains in detention, reportedly in a former factory in Donetsk.⁴⁵

A return of SMERSH to Luhansk?

Despite Nedelyayev's release, the situation in Luhansk is by no means better. Local separatists have been obsessed with »spymania« at least since September, when their leader Plotnitsky called for the resurrection of a World War II-era programme known as SMERSH, or »death to spies«, with an ensuing culture of denunciations.⁴⁶

»Security Minister« Pasechnik's subsequent rise to the »LNR's« highest office means that his »ministry« can expect even less internal scrutiny over its methods than before. On its website, the »MGB« has continued to publish videos of interrogations and confessions of persons either captured or imprisoned. In one of them, a man released by Ukraine in December's prisoner exchange, confesses of being a spy working for Kiev.⁴⁷

While observers welcomed December's prisoner swap, which saw the release of 73 persons from the people's republics, while Ukraine handed over 233 prisoners, enough people remain behind bars on both sides. »DNR« ombudswoman Daria Morozova has already said that Donetsk demands the release of another 84 persons from Ukraine.⁴⁸

Economy

The biggest blow to those hoping for a quick solution in eastern Ukraine was probably dealt by the almost complete economic separation of the »people's republics« from the rest of Ukraine that unfolded during the first quarter of 2017.

The story began in December 2016, when a group of former Ukrainian volunteer battalion fighters announced

that they would block trade routes with the separatist-held areas. The activists initially said⁴⁹ that their goal was to put economic pressure on Russia and its protectorates in order to achieve the release of Ukrainians held captive by the separatists. In January 2017, the first railway line was blocked, and in February the activists began blocking roads⁵⁰.

Industry grinds to a halt

As a result, major industrial enterprises in the people's republics ground to a halt. Thus, on February 20, Rinat Akhmetov's ECM group announced that the Yenakiieve Iron and Steel Works, which employs more than 5,300 people, were stopping production⁵¹.

While the Ukrainian authorities attempted to stop the blockade, first by negotiations and later by force, the separatists reacted early and in a highly coordinated fashion, usually a sign of them carrying out orders from Moscow.

On February 10th, both »parliaments« in Donetsk and Luhansk passed legislation that forces non-resident factory owners to pay taxes to the »republics«. That law served as the basis for the »external administration« that the separatists subsequently forced upon Ukrainian-held industries operating on their territories. While the law initially said this would happen after March 31, both separatist leaders on February 27 suddenly published a rare joint statement, announcing that the law would come into force on March 1, i.e. giving owners just two days to comply⁵².

Blockade made official by Poroshenko

Unsurprisingly, the blockade wasn't lifted and during March, the separatists effectively nationalized all major plants in their areas (see Newsletter 19⁵³). Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko gave up his opposition and made the blockade official state policy on March 16.⁵⁴

The effects of the blockade are hard to underestimate – but by most accounts, they hit the separatist areas much harder than Ukraine.

The Central Bank of Ukraine calculated that the blockade cost the country 1.8 billion dollars in revenue for the year 2017. National GDP growth is expected at just 2 per cent, 1.3 points less than without the blockade, according to the German Advisory Group Ukraine.⁵⁵ However, the group's CEO, Ricardo Giucci, argued that the country can compensate the loss of anthracite coal and coke from the separatist areas by importing them, albeit at higher

prices.⁵⁶ In the »people's republics« the 43 affected plants basically comprise all significant industrial assets. Without their Ukrainian supply chains and sales markets, developed during the past 25 years, the factories are bound to lie idle, unless the separatists can find new raw material sources and buyers.

E.g. restarting the huge Yenakiieve steel plant would cost 584 million Russian roubles (8.37 million euros) per day, according to a non-public report by the Donetsk »Ministry« for Industry and Trade, accidentally published in March. And, the longer a factory remains closed, the harder it is to start it again in the future.

That task is further complicated by the fact that »external administration« meant that the Ukrainian holding companies all withdrew their managers from the plants, leaving the separatists without the necessary know-how to run them (see Newsletters 20 and 23⁵⁷).

Separatist leaders kept saying that the plants' work would be re-oriented to Russia like in the Soviet past, but that proved much harder to implement in reality.

Production launched with Russian vehicles

Despite several declarations that plants were being re-started with business and trade ties to Russia, there was very little evidence of sustained industrial activity in the people's republics by the end of the year. Instead, Ukrainian media pointed out that high-profile production launches for excavators and busses in the »DNR« were staged with vehicles imported from Russia.⁵⁸ And at the end of the year, plants in Donetsk and Horlivka were reportedly again withholding payments.⁵⁹

Thus, the blockade must have significantly increased Russia's cost for keeping the people's republics alive. That cost, kept carefully secret by Moscow, was in 2016 estimated to be at least 1 billion euros per year (see our annual report for 2016⁶⁰). Ukraine's Security Service SBU said in February 2017 that it had uncovered the »LNR« budget, which it said had earmarked an income of 11 billion roubles for the year's first quarter, 9 billion of which were paid by Russia.⁶¹ This would amount to an annual Russian subsidy of 36 billion roubles, or 516 million euros, just for the smaller of the two republics.

Another item that was added to Russia's bill last year were electricity supplies to the »LNR«, after Ukraine cut them off in April, worth according to estimates in the Russian media 3.75 billion roubles (54 million euros) per year.⁶²

Bank transfers through South Ossetia

The necessary cash from Russia was revealed to be flowing to Luhansk and Donetsk via an unexpected hub – South Ossetia. The detour through the Caucasus was made necessary by the fact that the tiny breakaway republic of Georgia is so far the only »country« that has recognized the »people's republics'« independence. Because Russia has recognized South Ossetia, bank transfers from Moscow get to Donbass »legally« via this route. The local capital Tskhinvali is also believed to be the company seat of Vneshtorgservis - the secretive holding company running the seized enterprises (see Newsletter 22⁶³).

Russia maybe slowly recovering from recession, but it remains to be seen if and how long it can keep bankrolling the Donbass separatists. While there is practically no public debate about this in Russia, a media report from September, according to which Moscow is looking to redirect some 165 billion roubles (2,36 billion euros) for the coming three years in order to pay for infrastructure projects in Crimea and Kaliningrad, suggests that at least financial bargaining in the government has begun.⁶⁴

Outlook

The »people's republics« in 2017 suffered from economic downturn and political upheavals unseen since the conflict began in 2014. Yet, while their populations are most certainly dwindling, there was no dramatic outward migration during the past 12 months either.

So what makes people so content? The continued relative isolation of the »people's republics« leaves the biggest question unanswered – how would their population react if the Ukrainian state made a return, widely dubbed »reintegration« but increasingly »de-occupation« in Kiev.

One answer was provided in a survey conducted for the Berlin-based Center for East European and international Studies in May 2017. In telephone interviews, 44.5 per cent of respondents in the separatist-controlled areas said that they favoured unification with Russia.⁶⁵ A similar survey conducted in 2016 found that 48 per cent supported a political union with Russia (see our Annual Report 2016⁶⁶).

Even if telephone surveys in oppressive political environments may have a tendency to inflate responses in line with the agenda of those in power (the separatists), the results point to a relatively high and stable level of pro-Russian attitudes. This would be in line with the ongoing tendency in Russian state media (and separatist media outlets, of course) to portray Ukraine as a hostile state made up of aggressive nationalists.⁶⁷

On the other hand, very few people seem to have taken the necessary steps to sever their links with Ukraine.

According to figures released by the separatists close to the turn of the year, just 250,000 of officially 3.77 million inhabitants, or 6.6 per cent, have accepted »passports« issued by the de-facto authorities. In Donetsk, the number, published in January, was 150,000 passports out of 2.3 million inhabitants (6.5 per cent).⁶⁸ In Luhansk, the number, published in December, was 100,000 out of 1.474 million, or 6.8 per cent (Luhansk started issuing passports one year earlier than Donetsk).⁶⁹

Even if granted that the real numbers of people living permanently in the separatist-controlled areas is much lower than the official numbers, probably closer to 3 million, this means that some 8.3 per cent, certainly less than 10 per cent, have accepted passports.

These numbers, in turn, probably reflect the limited practical value of separatist passports. Outside from Russia and South Ossetia, these documents do not offer only symbolic use, while their possession, if caught, might prompt criminal procedures in Ukraine.

As no major shifts in great power politics are expected in 2018, the outlook is bleak. The people of eastern Ukraine's non-government controlled areas are likely to remain in limbo, while security, economic and political stability remain shaky at best.

Appendix

Chronology of developments in the »People's Republics« for 2017

January 18

German Chancellor Merkel and French President Hollande agree in phone talk with Russian President Putin to keep the Normandy Format going.

January 25

Activists begin their blockade of railways linking the »people's republics« with government-controlled areas.

January 28

US President Trump and his Russian colleague Putin hold their first telephone conversation. January 31 In Avdiivka, the OSCE records the heaviest fighting since the start of the conflict in 2014.

February 4

Trump holds his first phone call with Ukrainian President Poroshenko. The commander of the Luhansk »People's Militia«, »LNR«'s military commander Anashchenko is killed by a car bomb.

February 8

»DNR« field commander »Givi« is killed in Makiivka.

February 10

The »parliaments« of »DNR« and »LNR« announce laws introducing »external administration« for Ukrainian-owned plants by March 31.

February 12

Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin reveals that he is now an adviser and deputy battalion commander for Zakharchenko.

February 16

The blockade activists in Donbass announce their first roadblocks.

February 18

President Putin decrees that Russia will recognize separatist-issued passports and other documents.

February 27

Separatist leaders Zakharchenko and Plotnitsky announce that »external administration« will be introduced already on March 1, if the blockade continues.

March 16

After ongoing clashes with activists, President Poroshenko imposes the blockade himself.

March 31

A car bomb kills SBU counterterrorism colonel Kharaberyush in Mariupol.

April 3

Merkel and Hollande discuss a new ceasefire in a phone call with Poroshenko.

April 4

Merkel and Hollande discuss the latest ceasefire in a phone call with Putin.

April 5

Merkel discusses Donbass with Trump in phone call.

April 17

The »Normandy« leaders Merkel, Hollande, Poroshenko and Putin agree in a phone call to stick to the Minsk agreement.

April 23

A US paramedic is killed when an OSCE vehicle was blown up by a mine in the Luhansk region.

April 24

Ukraine turns off electricity supplies for »LNR«, Russia says it will step in.

May 2

Merkel and Putin hold talks in Sochi.

May 12

Trump tweets »Let's Make Peace« after meetings with Lavrov and Klimkin in Washington.

May 20

Merkel and Poroshenko hold talks in Meseberg outside Berlin.

June 27

Car bombs kill two Ukrainian intelligence officers - SBU Colonel Vosniy in Donetsk region, GUR officer Shapoval in Kiev.

July 7/8

Putin and Trump meet for the first time in Hamburg.

July 9

US Secretary of State Tillerson visits Poroshenko in Kiev.

July 18

»DNR« leader Zakharchenko declares a new state called »Malorossiya« to replace Ukraine and the »people's republics«. The plan is officially dropped on August 9.

July 24

The four Normandy leaders discuss the security situation with the head of the OSCE Mission, Ambassador Apakan.

July 26

Ukraine says it has cancelled electricity supply to the »DNR«.

August 21

The new US Representative to the Ukraine Negotiations Volker has his first meeting with his Russian counterpart Surkov in Minsk.

August 22/23

The Normandy leaders and the Minsk Contact Group announce a fresh ceasefire for the new School Year.

September 5

Russia's Putin says he supports a UN peacekeeping mission if deployed along the contact line to protect the OSCE observer Mission.

September 23

The »DNR's« powerful »Income Minister« Alexander Timofeyev claims he was targeted in an assassination attempt.

October 7

Russia's Surkov says his second meeting with US Representative Volker was constructive.

October 16

Surkov appears with Zakharchenko at the opening of a monument to Russian volunteer fighters in Rostov.

October 18

»DNR« leader Zakharchenko pushes Pushilin from party post, says he will run in 2018 »elections«.

November 09

»LNR« Plotnitsky begins his public feud with »Interior Minister« Kornet by exposing on TV that he was illegally living in an occupied house.

November 13

Surkov and Walker hold their third meeting in Belgrade.

November 20

Plotnitsky fires Kornet.

November 21

»Green men« appear in Luhansk to protect »minister« Kornet.

November 22

Ukrainian troops enter new villages near Svitlodarsk.

November 23

Plotnitsky is believed to have flown to Moscow.

November 24

Luhansk Intelligence Chief Pasechnik declares himself as Plotnitsky's successor.

December 15

Russia notifies the OSCE of its withdrawal from the Joint Centre for Control and Co-ordination (JCCC).

Dec 18/19

At least eight people are injured during a »Grad« missile attack on the government-controlled village of Novoluhanske.

December 22

The US State Department says that it has approved lethal arms sales to Ukraine.

December 27

In the first prisoner swap in more than a year, Ukraine releases 233 persons to the separatists, who in turn release 73.

Sources

Ukrainian Media

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

»**Ostro**« <http://www.ostro.org/> Also a new website originally from Donetsk

Realnaya Gazeta <http://realgazeta.com.ua/> A very thorough and well-sourced resource edited by the well-known journalist Andriy Dikhtaryenko, formerly Luhansk.

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

Media from the »DPR«

»**News agency**« (Website) »**Donetskoe Agentstvo Nowosti**« (DAN) <http://dan-news.info/> »DAN« is a 100 per cent state company, which works reliably but only publishes a highly restrictive range of news in uncritical style

Website of the »Ministry of Information« <http://dnr-online.ru/> Calls itself »Official site of the People's Republic« and publishes daily a large number of news items from all branches of »government« and administration.

Website of Alexander Zakharchenko <http://av-zakharchenko.su/> Contains official texts, videos and links to the social media channels of the »DPR« head

Media from the »LPR«

Luganski Informatsionni Tsentr (LIZ) <http://lug-info.com/> The equivalent of »DAN« in Donetsk, but with more partisan slant, indirectly supported Kornet and Pasechnik during the conflict with Plotnitsky

»**State television**« **GTRK** <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOM-PgCGKaX-KoIMhX8r-Ig> Sided with Plotnitsky until he vanished from Luhansk, has been reliably pro-Pasechnik since then

Website of Igor Plotnitsky and Leonid Pasechnik: Despite the leadership change, all the Plotnitsky-era content remains accessible, the site just changed its top level domain from .su to .info <https://glava-lnr.info/> (formerly <https://glava-lnr.su/>)

Russian Media

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

RIA Nowosti news agency <https://ria.ru/> State-run, mostly reliable, since its fusion with »Russia's Voice« in 2013 however, it closely cooperates with propaganda instruments such as Sputnik and RT

Life <https://life.ru/> a sensationalist, heavily pro-Kremlin tabloid news site.

Komsomolskaya Pravda <https://www.donetsk.kp.ru/> Less sensationalist but often just as pro-Kremlin tabloid as Life, especially when reporting from Donbass. Has a print version for Donetsk.

People Interviewed

Numerous contacts from the government and civil society in both Kiev and the Luhansk region, who gave background information.

Endnotes

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Deutsch-Russischer Austausch e.V. (DRA)

is a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Berlin, working since 1992 with the aim of promoting democratic developments in Russia and other East European countries through cooperation with Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian and other European NGOs, with independent mass media and in cross-sectoral cooperation. The DRA offers youth and other exchange programs in the field of political education, democracy and active citizenship and works to establish links with Western partners. Moreover, the DRA acts as an agency for volunteers between Eastern and Western Europe.

Annual Report on the Events in the »People's Republics« of Eastern Ukraine 2017

Four years after the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine, the armed conflict remains in stalemate. The terrible conditions for Ukrainians living in the conflict zone have not improved in 2017 and the political tensions that prevent a lasting diplomatic solution remain. Understanding the current situation requires an analysis of what is happening within the self-declared »people's republics«, that remain largely inaccessible to independent journalists and observers. With the aim of contributing to greater transparency regarding the developments in eastern Ukraine, the project »Human Rights Monitoring in Eastern Ukraine« presents this new analysis, compiled by Nikolaus von Twickel.

www.civicmonitoring.org

