



Rebels without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary..... | i |
| I. Introduction | 1 |
| II. “We Are Ready to Rise Up – Just Give the Order” | 2 |
| III. “Cleaning Up the Mess”: Moscow Abandons Novorossiya | 8 |
| IV. Dependent, Embittered, Abandoned: The Legacy of Moscow’s Policy Shift | 11 |
| A. The De Facto Leadership | 11 |
| B. The Splintered Movement | 12 |
| C. The Voiceless Population..... | 14 |
| V. Toward Unity..... | 17 |
| VI. Conclusion | 19 |
| APPENDICES | |
| A. Map of Ukraine..... | 20 |
| B. Map of Donbas Conflict Zone..... | 21 |
| C. About the International Crisis Group | 22 |
| D. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Europe and Central Asia since 2016..... | 23 |
| E. Crisis Group Board of Trustees | 24 |

Principal Findings

What's new? Russia's gradual retreat from any plans to annex parts of eastern Ukraine has opened schisms between Moscow and its separatist proxies in the region.

Why does it matter? For Kyiv, these divides could create opportunities to restart dialogue with the people of the east. Such contacts, in turn, could help lay the groundwork for Ukraine's unification.

What should be done? The rift between Moscow and its proxies should inform new Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's policies. Kyiv should look to rebuild relations with the inhabitants of separatist-held areas, by easing the economic blockade on the east and increasing outreach to the population there.

Executive Summary

The spring of 2019 marked five years since Russian-backed fighters seized government buildings in two eastern Ukrainian cities and proclaimed the independent Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (D/LPR). The ensuing conflict, which has claimed over 13,000 lives, continues to fester, with neither the Ukrainian nor the Russian government thus far willing to take decisive steps to end it. As Russia has distanced itself from either annexing the de facto republics, as it did with Crimea, or recognising their independence, many separatists have fallen out with the Kremlin. For its part, the wider population feels neglected by both Kyiv and Moscow. With a new president in office, Kyiv has an opportunity to define a policy that is informed by this reality, is in line with the 2014 and 2015 Minsk agreements that lay out a roadmap to end the conflict, and also meets Ukrainian and local security needs. This policy should prepare the ground for those areas' reintegration into Ukraine and restore lines of communication to their inhabitants, including by easing the economic blockade that keeps them isolated and impoverished.

Ukraine and its Western supporters typically have responded to Russia's incursion into eastern Ukraine, or Donbas, through policies and rhetoric that treat the conflict as one entirely between Kyiv and Moscow. Ukrainian leaders frequently adopt language that suggests eastern Ukraine's fighters, political leaders and population are foreign and conflates all three with Russian forces. Neither Russia's aggression nor its substantial control over the de facto republics' leadership is in question. But to view Donbas solely as Russian-occupied territory is to miss important developments on the ground.

If, in 2014, Moscow's aims in Donbas aligned with those of the rebels it backed, as the Kremlin supported the separatist project, since then, their respective aspirations have diverged. As Moscow lost its appetite for more Ukrainian territory, it shifted its calculus. In the near term, Russia is helping ensure the D/LPR's hold on the territories they have gained, mainly to maintain leverage over Ukraine but also out of fear of reprisals were Ukrainian forces and allied militias to enter separatist-held areas. In the longer term, Russia aims to make the east's reintegration into Ukraine less costly to the separatists and more advantageous to Moscow – that is, it wants a reintegrated Donbas with substantial autonomy or special status. To a large extent, the second Minsk agreement formalised these goals. While this new approach suited Moscow's plans, it was not what the de facto leaders sought. Indeed, many of those who continue to fight against Ukrainian forces in Donbas still seek a Russian protectorate – even if Moscow is less than enthusiastic about the notion.

Moscow's abandonment of plans to annex the territory or recognise its independence has left the separatist movement in the east splintered. Meanwhile, shifts in the D/LPR leadership have solidified Moscow's control over those in charge, while also removing from power some who had enjoyed a measure of grassroots support. The result is three distinct groups in the east: a proxy leadership financially and politically dependent on Moscow but with no clear policy goals or local base of its own; ideological separatists whose hopes of joining Russia have been dashed; and the ma-

majority of the population, worn out by war and frustrated at the seeming indifference of both Kyiv and Moscow.

With a new government in Kyiv, this evolution could present opportunities. Informed by the reality that perspectives in the D/LPR are far from unified, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy could start rebuilding Kyiv's relations with the war-torn region. He has good reason to do so. Only with improved ties can the Ukrainian leader hope to convince the people of these regions that Kyiv has their best interests at heart, an essential starting point to reintegrating those areas into the Ukrainian body politic. The growing divides among Moscow, the original separatists and Donbas's population also mean that while a deal with the Kremlin is a prerequisite for peace in Donbas, in itself it may not be enough. Russia's proxies in power in the D/LPR would probably have to agree to whatever Russia signed off on, but could face discontent from an already angry population, including from separatists who might hesitate to lay down arms. Besides, improved relations with the Donbas population could potentially strengthen Kyiv's hand in negotiations with Moscow.

Building such ties will be hard, given the distrust and anger that exists both in the D/LPR at Kyiv and in Kyiv at the separatists and people living in areas they control. Nor does Kyiv have obvious interlocutors: the dependence of leaders of the de facto D/LPR governments on Moscow suggests that they can deliver little on their own.

But there are people in Donbas who command local respect, are frustrated with the status quo and are open to discussing the region's future. Some are early supporters of separatism, now disillusioned. Others are community leaders who have emerged over the past five years. They include, importantly in this otherwise male-dominated environment, some women. Even if the Ukrainian government itself does not seek to engage directly, President Zelenskyy can take steps to rebuild trust, make contacts across front lines easier and lay the groundwork for future engagement. Easing the economic blockade would help, for example, as would facilitating social, economic and community contacts across the line of contact. Kyiv should also take steps to ensure local residents' access to their pensions and to lift restrictions on local official use of the Russian language.

Resolving the Donbas conflict requires both Russia and Ukraine to carry out the Minsk agreements in full or to find another way forward. While they have in principle agreed on what needs to happen, in line with those accords, each has insisted that the other take the first step: Russia wants Ukraine to offer autonomy to the Donbas; Ukraine wants Russia to cease its military involvement and ensure that the forces it backs disarm. But even if Moscow and Kyiv concur on the initial moves, Ukraine faces an additional challenge. Reintegrating separatist-held areas will require Kyiv to persuade the people who live there that their future is Ukrainian. This process is unlikely to be rapid or smooth, but outreach is the place to start.

Moscow/Kyiv/Brussels, 16 July 2019

Rebels without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine

I. Introduction

Ukraine's 2013-2014 Maidan revolution was a dramatic manifestation of a national debate over the country's political and socio-economic future. The Maidan protesters wanted to be rid of a government that they felt was corrupt and had betrayed them by prioritising a strong relationship with Russia over growing closeness to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Many in parts of eastern Ukraine took the opposite position: they feared that too warm an embrace of countries to Ukraine's west would hurt their livelihoods, a large number of which were tied to trade and close relations with Russia. Soon after the Maidan activists succeeded in changing the government, protests began in the east. Russia did not instigate this unrest – at least, not all of it. It did, however, help inspire, fuel and perpetuate the protests. First, Moscow's move to annex Crimea emboldened a separatist movement in the eastern region known as Donbas, which harboured hopes that Russia would take in eastern Ukraine as it had the Black Sea peninsula. Then, Russia's support for that movement ensured that it survived when Kyiv pushed back.

This report analyses the evolving relationship between Moscow and its proxies in eastern Ukraine since the early days of the crisis. Drawing on interviews in Crimea, Donetsk and Moscow with rebels, Russian fighters, former and current Russian officials, and de facto republic officials, as well as analysis of public statements and other open sources, it explores how Moscow's objectives gradually have diverged from those of the separatists. It then offers recommendations for more effective Ukrainian engagement with the population in the east.

II. “We Are Ready to Rise Up – Just Give the Order”

The conflict in eastern Ukraine started as a grassroots movement, albeit one that Moscow inspired and then aggressively exploited. In November 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, under pressure from Russia, abandoned plans to sign an Association Agreement with the EU. The agreement would have facilitated free trade with Europe and paved the way for eventual EU membership, a longstanding goal of many Ukrainians. Moscow saw the agreement as a threat to Ukraine's integration into the Eurasian Customs Union, the body co-founded by Russia in 2010 to rival the EU. The Kremlin also feared that the deal would allow Ukraine to slip out of Russia's sphere of influence.¹

Angered by the decision, protesters gathered in Kyiv's Independence Square (in Ukrainian, Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or the Maidan), first demanding the agreement's restoration and later Yanukovich's ouster. Despite at first tolerating the demonstrations, the government responded with violence. Protesters, some of whom were armed, defended themselves. At least 100 people died in the clashes. In late February, about to be rejected by his own government, Yanukovich fled to Russia and a new interim government headed by Arseniy Yatsenyuk took over.

The new government was ill prepared for what followed. Almost immediately, it took two body blows: first, Russia's incursion into and annexation of Crimea in February and March, and then insurrection in several cities in Donbas. The latter demonstrations were led by local citizens claiming to represent the region's Russian-speaking majority. They were concerned both about the political and economic ramifications of the new Kyiv government and about moves, later aborted, by that government to curtail the official use of Russian language throughout the country. They were joined by activists and volunteers from Moscow, in a movement that came to be known in the region as the “Russian spring”. Activists staged rallies that led to clashes, sometimes deadly, with the forces and supporters of the new government in Kyiv.

While many of these protests raised the prospect of secession, a number of demonstrators had no particular agenda vis-à-vis Russia but simply aimed to challenge the new Kyiv government. According to one activist:

When the “Russian spring” first started, people in Luhansk didn't want to join Russia. Not even close. They just didn't agree with events in Kyiv. People were looking at their televisions – they had never been to Kyiv before and didn't want it to come to them. People didn't understand why the takeover of the regional government building in Lviv [by pro-Maidan activists in January 2014] was good but in Luhansk it was a crime.²

¹ See Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men* (New York, 2016).

² Crisis Group interview, Moscow, March 2018. The Lviv reference is to events around the Maidan protests that toppled President Yanukovich in January 2014. Then, pro-Maidan activists set up barricades and seized government administration buildings in several oblasts in western Ukraine. See “Unrest in Ukraine: barricades erected in Lviv”, BBC, 24 January 2014.

Others, however, were inspired by Russia's takeover of Crimea and saw eastern Ukraine's future in a merger with Moscow. Widespread support in Russia for Crimea's "rejoining" Russia raised their hopes that the same could happen in Donbas. One veteran Kremlin adviser with strong connections in Crimea and Donetsk said:

[The Crimea annexation] triggered many offers and requests from Ukraine's eastern regions, saying [to Moscow]: "We are ready to rise up. Just give the order". [Militia] divisions were formed. They offered to take depots and get organised. Moscow did not give the green light [to rise up]. But it gave the green light to prepare.³

Several other informed sources corroborated this account, though versions differ on the precise levels of support and involvement Moscow offered.⁴ If they are correct and Moscow truly authorised these preparations, it did so because it saw an opportunity to co-opt the Donbas activists. The Kremlin had an interest in keeping Ukraine within its sphere of influence and establishing a protectorate over Russian-speaking people outside its borders. Moreover, it saw its objectives aligning with the pro-Russia Donbas groups, which it doubted could coexist with a new government in Kyiv.

Support for the Donbas protesters within Russia was high, especially in the wake of the Crimea annexation. Think-tanks like the Russky Mir Foundation and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, headed at the time by former Foreign Intelligence Service agent Leonid Reshetnikov, promoted the increasingly popular idea of "the Russian world", a cultural, religious and sometimes political concept which "reconnects the Russian diaspora with its homeland" – a homeland representing "much more than the territory of the Russian Federation and the 143 million people living within its borders".⁵ In Donbas, "Russian world" proponents saw an opportunity to capitalise on Russian nationalist sentiment among Russian-speaking Ukrainians and protect civilians from what they (and many in eastern Ukraine) portrayed as a "fascist junta" that had seized power in Kyiv.⁶ In line with the "Russian world" concept, they built a case for historical Russian claims to parts of eastern Ukraine, even occasionally referring to these lands as Novorossiia, or New Russia.⁷

³ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, March 2018.

⁴ Given the covert nature of Moscow's involvement, it is difficult to gather or confirm information on the exact amount of support, what its conditions were and what orders, if any, were given. Some of this support evidently came from Russian officials acting very much in a personal capacity, albeit perhaps with tacit encouragement from above. Likewise, the role of Russian security personnel advising and coordinating on the ground in Donbas was initially opaque: there were those who went on their own initiative and those who were likely given orders. Based on some accounts, Moscow's support was conditional upon success. Based on other accounts, it was unconditional. Crisis Group interviews, former officials, policymakers and activists, Moscow, March-April 2014 and March, April, August 2018.

⁵ See the Russky Mir Foundation's website.

⁶ «Больше не хунта: как поменялась риторика госканалов об украинском кризисе» ["No longer a junta: how state television rhetoric about the Ukrainian crisis has changed"], RBC, 1 July 2014.

⁷ Novorossiia was the term the Russian Empire gave to its new acquisitions, including Donbas, in 1764. The term Malorossiia, or Little Russia, was used to denote Ukraine within the Russian Empire during the 19th century. At various times, nationalists in Russia have sought to revive both ideas. The Ukrainian government regards the terms Malorossiia and Novorossiia as offensive. See "Ukraine conflict: Russia rejects new Donetsk rebel 'state'", BBC, 19 July 2017.

According to Donbas political activists and Russian policymakers, this thinking found its way into the Kremlin.⁸ In the spring of 2014, for instance, Vladimir Putin referred to Donbas regions as being historically separate from Ukraine. “I’ll remind you: this is Novorossiia. Kharkov, Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa were not part of Ukraine during Tsarist times. These were all territories given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why [the Soviets] did that, only God knows”.⁹ Though Putin did not go as far as to claim that Russia should reabsorb these lands, many have interpreted his comments as inspiration for the separatist cause.

In the early months of 2014, Novorossiia proponents developed a scenario that in many ways mimicked Russia’s annexation of Crimea – albeit without the large-scale Russian military presence. Local militias in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Odessa, Zaporozhye and other parts of Donbas would seize government buildings and then, supported by undercover Russian forces, hold a referendum to demonstrate popular backing for either independence or unification with Russia.¹⁰

In March and April 2014, encouraged by the enthusiasm in Russia, Donbas activists moved from street protests to more direct action. Copying what Maidan activists had done in western Ukraine, they seized government buildings in Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv, and tried to do the same in other eastern cities. They declared the independence of “people’s republics”, which they assumed Moscow would rapidly recognise, and called referenda on joining Russia, which they scheduled for 11 May.

But the Kremlin’s policy toward eastern Ukraine proved neither coherent nor consistent. An expert connected to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs described a split within government elites between “doves” who doubted that the Crimea scenario would work in Donbas and “hawks” who believed that Russia could count on local mobilisation to help oust Ukrainian forces and then annex as many as six eastern Ukrainian regions.¹¹ Russian leaders officially said nothing. Absent clear guidance, government advisers and businessmen appear to have acted on their own initiative, without much effort to work together. One such businessman was Konstantin Malofeyev, who allegedly financed the first leaders of the nascent “people’s republics” in Donbas.¹² Meanwhile, increasing numbers of Russian irregulars, encouraged by state propaganda and what they regarded as the government’s tacit approval, made their way to Ukraine.

The chief backer of annexation appears to have been Kremlin adviser Sergey Glazyev, an outspoken champion of Novorossiia.¹³ A former Kremlin official said Glazyev

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, policymaker and activists, Moscow, March, April, August 2018.

⁹ See this video excerpt from Putin’s call-in show, which aired on all state-run channels. “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin”, Russia Today, 17 April 2014.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, March-September 2018.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, August 2018.

¹² Alexei Ponomarev, «Бизнесмен Малофеев рассказал о связях со Стрелковым и Бородаем» [“Businessman Malofeyev tells of his ties to Strelkov and Borodai”], *Slon*, 13 November 2014. EU authorities implicated Malofeyev in financing the de facto republics and destabilising Ukraine. See Council Implementing Regulation No. 826/2014, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 30 July 2014.

¹³ Several well-connected policymakers confirm Glazyev’s role. See also Glazyev’s interview quoted in “Sergei Glazyev: strongly, firmly and accurately”, Center for Strategic Assessment and Forecasts, 20 June 2014. Crisis Group interviews, Kremlin-connected policymakers, Moscow, March, May 2018.

based his plan on the premise that pro-Russian sentiment was so strong and widespread in eastern Ukraine that, together with hatred for Kyiv's new government, it would deliver the area into Moscow's hands.¹⁴ Evidence, including telephone conversations intercepted and recorded by Ukrainian intelligence, suggests that he gave direct instructions to the lead organisers of the Donbas uprisings, and talked of financial and military support pending the insurgents' success.¹⁵ Pavel Gubarev, a Ukrainian who was one of the first self-proclaimed leaders of Novorossiia, cited a telephone call from Glazyev in which the Russian congratulated him after he and others seized administration buildings in Donetsk on 5 March 2014.¹⁶ (Glazyev, in an interview with Malofeyev's Tsargrad television channel, denied having any involvement with the separatists.¹⁷)

The Kremlin itself denies interfering in Ukraine and in general does not reveal its foreign policy plans or actions. At the time of the Crimea annexation, for instance, Putin refuted claims of such involvement. Later, however, once the annexation was complete, he described how Russia took over the peninsula. In a Russian documentary aired in March 2015, Putin explained that on 23 February 2014, "[he] told all [his] colleagues, 'We are forced to begin the work of bringing Crimea back into Russia'".¹⁸ In Donbas, Moscow has continued to officially maintain that it has not and does not support the separatists. Putin insists that Russia has no troops in Ukraine. Verifying what the Russian government was doing or attempting to do in the spring of 2014 is therefore a challenge. But reports that Moscow was sending weapons and personnel to Donbas were plentiful.¹⁹ Even Russian denials are not fully consistent: in December 2015 Putin said "we never said there were no people [there] who are working on resolving certain issues, including in the military sphere. But that does not mean there are regular troops".²⁰

There were certainly irregular forces. Russian volunteers, many with military or security backgrounds and combat experience, rushed to Ukraine, whether under tacit orders, impelled by their own enthusiasm or both. Their ranks first numbered in the hundreds, then the thousands. Most notorious was former Russian intelligence officer Igor Girkin, who went by the *nom de guerre* Strelkov. A World War II re-enactor and an avid proponent of Novorossiia, Strelkov had led irregular forces involved in

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, May 2018.

¹⁵ «Экс-глава луганской СБУ Петрулевич: Именно советник президента РФ Глазьев поднимал восток Украины после обкатки в Крыму сценария с 'Путин, введи войска!» ["Former head of Luhansk SBU Petrulevich: It was Russian presidential aide Glazyev who stirred up an insurgency in eastern Ukraine after trying the 'Putin, send troops!' scenario in Crimea"], *Gordon*, 14 July 2017.

¹⁶ Pavel Gubarev, *Факел Новороссиу* (The Torch of Novorossiia) (St. Petersburg, 2016).

¹⁷ "Glazyev: 'I am not interested in Nazis'", Tsargrad TV, 2 March 2017.

¹⁸ "Putin reveals secrets of Russia's Crimea takeover plot", BBC, 9 March 2015.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Kremlin-connected advisers, Moscow, March, August 2018. See also Thomas Grove and Warren Strobel, "Special report: Where Ukraine's separatists get their weapons", Reuters, 29 July 2014.

²⁰ «Путин признал наличие в Донбассе 'решающих военные вопросы' россиян» ["Putin admitted to the presence of Russians resolving military issues in Donbas"], RBC, 17 December 2015.

the annexation of Crimea in February and March.²¹ In April, he brought a unit of 52 men from Russia to the Donetsk region, and helped take over law enforcement offices in Sloviansk. He then called upon Russia to send troops to hold this city and Kramatorsk. When Ukrainian fighters joined his ranks, Strelkov became the most powerful commander in Donetsk at the time. In early May, he declared himself “commander-in-chief of all ... armed formations, security services, police, customs, border guards, prosecutors and other paramilitary structures” in Donetsk region.²²

But the separatist movement did not pan out as Moscow hawks had expected. Some of the population were indeed nervous about the new government in Kyiv, but majority support for joining Russia simply was not there.²³ In city after city, separatists encountered pushback. In Kharkiv, where they proclaimed independence from Ukraine along with Luhansk and Donetsk on 7 April, Kyiv’s Interior Ministry troops suppressed the insurgency the following day, persuading the mayor to switch sides. In Odessa, clashes between separatists and Kyiv’s supporters culminated in a standoff on 2 May, during which over 40 people, mostly separatists, were killed. Many burned to death in a fire that engulfed the Trade Union Building they had tried to seize. The fire became a symbol of the “Russian spring”, but the separatists’ failure in Odessa also demonstrated the absence of local support for secession.

Even in the two cities where the “peoples’ republics” survived, public opinion on the proposed referendums was uneven.²⁴ One young rebel told a visiting journalist that the path forward lay in uniting with Russia with President Vladimir Putin’s help.²⁵ But many others spoke merely of greater autonomy from Kyiv, not of independence or merger with Russia.²⁶

Meanwhile, the stakes for Russia were rising. Viewing irregulars such as Strelkov’s personnel as Russian invaders, Ukraine in early April launched what it termed an “anti-terrorist operation” (in large part to avoid declaring war). The U.S., along with EU countries, imposed sanctions on Russia, much tougher penalties than those that had followed the annexation of Crimea.

With the separatists losing steam, the Kremlin began to distance itself from the movement it had inspired. A Ukrainian rebel in Strelkov’s regiment described a shift in the message from Moscow as early as late April. It was then that he began hearing calls for restraint in rebel efforts to take control of eastern Ukrainian towns and cities.²⁷ Kremlin insiders suggested that the change occurred later.²⁸ One described Putin undergoing a “sudden” change in tune expressed at a press conference after meeting with Swiss President Didier Burkhalter on 7 May.²⁹ In his remarks, Putin

²¹ Footage of Strelkov’s participation in a televised debate, video, YouTube, 27 January 2015. On the importance of World War II re-enactments in contemporary Russian nationalism, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°251, *Patriotic Mobilisation in Russia*, 4 July 2018.

²² «ДНР объявила войну Украине и призвала на помощь Россию» [“DPR declared war on Ukraine and called on Russia for help”], *Novosti Donbassa*, 3 March 2014.

²³ Crisis Group interview, former Kremlin official, May 2018.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civilians and fighters, Donetsk, May 2014.

²⁵ Crisis Group analyst’s interview in a previous capacity, Donetsk, May 2014.

²⁶ Crisis Group analyst’s interviews in a previous capacity, residents, Donetsk, May 2014.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, former irregular fighter, Moscow, April 2019.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Moscow, March-September 2018.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, March 2018.

appealed to the separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk to “hold off on the referendum in order to give dialogue the conditions it needs to have a chance”.³⁰

But the separatist movement in Donbas was determined to move ahead, choosing to ignore or creatively interpret Putin’s comments. Denis Pushilin, one of the members of the emerging separatist government in Donetsk, was among those who pushed forward with the referendum in that city. On 8 May, three days before the scheduled ballot, he took part in a closed-door meeting with local lawmakers and other leaders. A Crisis Group witness to the discussion was struck that participants appeared to take Putin’s words to imply the opposite of their literal meaning. A lawmaker, for instance, said:

The referendum has to happen. But I see that a number of people seem to be in a state of confusion after Vladimir Vladimirovich’s comments. This was an act of colossal support for us. ... It was a proclamation to the whole world that we are holding a referendum. Thanks to Vladimir Vladimirovich’s statements, people from across the world will know that the Donetsk People’s Republic will express its will. It was a positioning of the Donetsk Republic as a people’s republic.³¹

After further comments in this vein, the meeting attendees voted unanimously to go ahead with the ballot. On 11 May, the referenda passed in both Donetsk and Luhansk. Though neither Moscow nor Kyiv recognised the result, the leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (D/LPR) declared independence from Ukraine.

³⁰ Transcript of press statements, official Kremlin website, 7 May 2014.

³¹ A meeting of deputies in Donetsk witnessed by Crisis Group analyst in a previous capacity, 7 May 2014.

III. “Cleaning Up the Mess”: Moscow Abandons Novorossiya

Moscow's change of heart meant that it would not recognise the statelets. Annexing them was also out of the question. But neither was Moscow ready to hand them back to Ukraine. Moreover, in Donbas, Moscow's clients and ordinary citizens feared that return to the Ukrainian fold would lead to violent reprisals, a potentially self-fulfilling prophecy. Moscow's support, which remained unacknowledged (as Russia insisted that it was not a party to the conflict), thus aimed to help the statelets hang on to the territories they had gained in the near term. In the longer term, it sought to lay the groundwork for the D/LPR's future reintegration into Ukraine with greater autonomy or special status sufficient to permit continuing influence over Kyiv's policy choices.³²

Officially, Moscow would not acknowledge backtracking on a policy it never admitted to supporting in the first place. But even in public statements, the change was visible. Starting in late 2014, mentions of Novorossiya by Putin or other state officials started to disappear. Belligerent rhetoric on state television describing the government in Kyiv as a fascist junta also diminished.³³ In 2018, Sergei Glazyev, the Kremlin aide who initially spearheaded support for the Novorossiya idea, described its abandonment as a mistake – in effect acknowledging that Moscow had changed its plans or at least its aspirations. “We were supposed to free all of the [Ukrainian] south east. Why didn't we free it? I think it was the result of Western provocation. ... It was, I think, a blatant strategic error”.³⁴

Reflecting its shifting calculus, Moscow reportedly eased out the leaders, Ukrainian and Russian, who had led the initial fight with figures it found more manageable. One of the first out was Strelkov. On 14 August 2014, Russian state media reported that the DPR's leadership had let the commander go at his own request.³⁵ But a former Kremlin official suggested that Moscow had grown frustrated with Strelkov's activities and his increasingly strident calls for more intervention from Moscow. “He went over there and started this mess ... and now we are cleaning it up”.³⁶ A fellow Russian combatant told Crisis Group that the Kremlin pressured Strelkov to leave Donbas in exchange for a promise that Moscow would reinforce and resupply the DPR forces.³⁷ The D/LPR leadership also changed hands as Moscow sought to establish more order. In early August, Aleksandr Zakharchenko took over the DPR and

³² For an analysis of Moscow's motivations and logic, see Tatyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff, “The Logic of Competitive Influence-Seeking: Russia, Ukraine and the Conflict in Donbas”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 34, no. 4 (2018), pp. 191-212.

³³ «Больше не хунта: как поменялась риторика госканалов об украинском кризисе» [“No longer a junta: how state TV rhetoric about the Ukrainian crisis has changed”], RBC, op. cit.

³⁴ «Советник Путина: Отказ от освобождения юго-востока Украины был большой ошибкой» [“Putin's adviser: Decision not to free the south east of Ukraine was a mistake”], *Novorossiya Inform*, 7 August 2018.

³⁵ “Donetsk People's Republic dismisses defence minister”, TASS, 14 August 2014.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Kremlin-connected policymaker, Moscow, April 2018.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, former rebel fighter, Moscow, April 2018.

Igor Plotnitsky the LPR; widespread reports suggest both were appointed on Moscow's orders.³⁸

To help the D/LPR forces defend the areas they controlled, Moscow beefed up its military support. In the summer of 2014 and in early 2015, Moscow covertly sent troops to help the de facto leadership secure positions it had taken and prevent their recapture by Ukrainian forces.³⁹ "The process of intensifying Moscow's [military] support for the DPR and LPR and the process of abandoning the idea of Novorossiia went in parallel", said a former Russian lawmaker, citing ostensibly humanitarian aims. "As the idea of Novorossiia waned, [military] support intensified, with the aim of protecting them from mass terror".⁴⁰ Moscow denies taking these steps.⁴¹

The cornerstone of Moscow's efforts to ensure that any reintegration would occur under conditions it considered favourable were the two peace accords signed by representatives of Ukraine, Russia, OSCE and the de facto republics (these parties also comprise the Trilateral Contact Group created in the spring of 2014 to maintain dialogue between parties to the conflict and seek resolution).

The first agreement, the Minsk Protocol, was signed on 5 September 2014. The Minsk Package of Measures, colloquially known as Minsk II, was signed in February 2015. Both aimed to end intense fighting. The Protocol followed a battle for the city of Ilovaik in Donetsk, but the attendant ceasefire failed to take hold, and fighting resumed at Donetsk airport by the end of the month. Minsk II was signed shortly after Russian-backed forces captured the airport and amid clashes around the strategic rail junction of Debaltseve. The second agreement, initially an addendum to the protocol, in effect replaced the initial package as the only internationally agreed-upon peace plan for Donbas. It stipulated a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weaponry by all sides from a contact line demarcated in the first protocol, amnesty for separatist fighters and implementation of a "special status" for rebel-held areas, among other provisions.

The other mechanism for resolving the crisis was the Normandy Format, launched in the summer of 2014 by representatives of four countries: Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France. The four have not met since 2016, although both Ukraine and Russia have voiced hopes of restarting conversations and expanding the format.

For Moscow, the Minsk stipulation of special status for Donbas was a victory. The status envisioned decentralisation or federalisation that would allow the areas in question more autonomy from Kyiv than any other region in Ukraine. It would also increase the political weight of Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine in national debates.

³⁸ See, for example, Anton Zverev, "Ex-rebel leaders detail role played by Putin aide in east Ukraine", Reuters, 11 May 2017. See also «Москва убрала Стрелкова и Болотова с Подачи Ахметова» ["Moscow removed Strelkov and Bolotov at Akhmetov's request"], APN, 8 July 2014. See also the posts by the well-informed Crimea-based blogger, Boris Rozhin, aka colonelcassad. In discussions with Crisis Group, Russian activists, policymakers and advisers said it was common knowledge that Moscow was behind such decisions. Crisis Group interviews, Moscow, March 2018, March 2019.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, government advisers and policymakers, Moscow, March-August 2018.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, former Russian lawmaker, March 2018.

⁴¹ Putin has repeatedly denied the presence of Russian armed forces in Ukraine. In December 2015, he admitted there may be some personnel but not regular troops. See «Путин признал наличие в Донбассе 'решающих военные вопросы' россиян» ["Putin admitted to the presence of Russians resolving military issues in Donbas"], RBC, 17 December 2015.

As long as Moscow's influence remains high with this population, such arrangements would translate into leverage for Moscow over Kyiv's decision-making. For these same reasons, Kyiv saw the inclusion of special status in Minsk as a loss.

But D/LPR leaders were also unhappy. Even before the first Minsk meeting in September 2014, Zakharchenko and his associates complained that Moscow was obliging them to agree to reintegration into Ukraine against their will. Zakharchenko lambasted the conditions on special status set out in the 5 September agreement and rejected anything less than independence. In October, he threatened to resign, dismissing the contact line agreed to in Minsk as a betrayal because it precluded the possibility of a wider Novorossiia.⁴² By February 2015, Zakharchenko had softened his public statements, but it seems that his concerns were not fully assuaged. Both he and Plotnitsky initially refused to endorse the package of measures at the second round of negotiations. It reportedly took Putin's personal intervention – two hours of private conversation – to convince both to sign.⁴³

Even long after Minsk II, Zakharchenko continued to espouse integration not with Ukraine but with Russia. "Russia is our motherland and everything that we are doing is so that we can ... become one people", he said in May 2017. "Unfortunately, history has divided us, but people change history. And we are all going to change history together. We have one aim – to return to our motherland".⁴⁴

For Moscow, Minsk II constituted a formal withdrawal of support for separatist aspirations. But even as it abandoned the Novorossiia cause, it would find it difficult to abandon that cause's local and Russian standard bearers, who had shed blood fighting for it in Donbas, without risking backlash at home. By allowing freelancers and enthusiasts to shape its policy in Donbas to the extent that it did, the Kremlin wound up beholden to the de facto governments, as well as their Russian supporters, just as D/LPR figures were beholden to the Kremlin, and entrenched in a conflict with no exit strategy.

⁴² Marina Akhmedova, «Начальник Донбасса» [“The Boss of Donbas”], *Expert*, no. 39, 2014.

⁴³ At the talks' end, the de facto republics rejected the agreement, leading to its near collapse. Putin withdrew to discuss the matter over the phone with Zakharchenko and Plotnitsky, and after two hours, the leaders agreed to a ceasefire. See “Can Merkel's diplomacy save Europe?”, *Spiegel Online*, 14 February 2015. See also «В Минске договорились о прекращении огня на Украине» [“Ceasefire in Ukraine agreed to in Minsk”], *Kommersant*, 11 February 2015.

⁴⁴ See comments made at a session of the Integrational Committee of Russia-Donbas, 12 May 2017.

IV. **Dependent, Embittered, Abandoned: The Legacy of Moscow's Policy Shift**

The Kremlin's abandonment of the Novorossiia concept left in its wake a movement in Donbas whose interests no longer align with Moscow's. Meanwhile, Moscow's control over the de facto republics' leadership has alienated the grassroots element that had given the separatist insurgency a modicum of popularity when it began. Today, after five years of war, Moscow's shifting policies have split the Donbas polity into three groups: a proxy leadership dependent on Moscow but with no cause or real grassroots support of its own; an embittered set of fighters and activists whose hopes of independence or joining Russia have been denied, in their eyes, by Moscow itself; and a population worn out by war that feels abandoned by both Kyiv and Moscow.

A. *The De Facto Leadership*

The de facto D/LPR leadership is financially and politically beholden to Moscow, which, as of the spring of 2019, has further solidified its control over the statelets. During the war's early years, Russia arguably struggled to retain control over de facto governments riveted by murders, coups and financial and political rivalries. Over the past two years – whether by design or providence – it has dealt with more pliant leaders.

But if the movement's leaders are now firmly under Moscow's influence, those who emerged from grassroots separatist movements in Donbas have effectively been sidelined. In the fall of 2017, the LPR's "security minister" Leonid Pasechnik replaced LPR head Igor Plotnitsky in what was reported to have been a Russian security services-backed coup.⁴⁵ Then, in August 2018, DPR chief Alexander Zakharchenko, whose relationship with Moscow had grown increasingly tense, was killed by a bomb in Donetsk, with both Moscow and Kyiv exchanging blame over his murder.

On 11 November 2018, following Zakharchenko's assassination, the D/LPR held new elections. Moscow appears to have forced the exclusion of popular leaders and Novorossiia idealists like Aleksandr Khodakovsky and Pavel Gubarev. Khodakovsky was the former commander of the Vostok Battalion – an irregular regiment that rivalled Strelkov's in the early days – and DPR "security minister". Russian border guards barred his entry into Ukraine ahead of the vote. For his part, Pavel Gubarev, a former DPR leader, was prevented from registering his candidacy by DPR's election authorities, on what were widely reported to be the Kremlin's orders.⁴⁶ Moscow backed Denis Pushilin, the Donetsk politician who had urged moving ahead with the independence referendum after Putin expressed his reservations. He ran against

⁴⁵ Christopher Miller, "What in the world is going on in the Russian-backed separatist Luhansk 'Republic'?", RFE/RL, 22 November 2017. "Кремль встал на сторону главы МВД в его конфликте с Плотницким" ["The Kremlin took the interior minister's side in his conflict with Plotnitsky"], RBC, 21 November 2017. On Moscow's backing and the limits of its control, see also Maxim Vikhrov, "The Luhansk Coup: Why Armed Conflict Erupted in Russia's Puppet Regime", Carnegie Moscow Center, 29 November 2017.

⁴⁶ Galina Korba, «Россия не хочет сюрпризов: К чему приведут выборы в 'ДНР' и 'ЛНР'». ["Russia doesn't want surprises: what the elections in 'DPR' and 'LPR' will bring"], BBC (Ukrainian Service), 9 November 2018.

lesser-known candidates and won with 60.8 per cent of the vote. In the LPR, the Kremlin continued to support Pasechnik, who prevailed with 68.4 per cent.

The choice of Pushilin may seem odd, given his push for the referendum, his past statements in favour of joining Russia and Moscow's withdrawal of support for east Ukraine politicians espousing such ideas. In February 2016, Pushilin argued that "the integration of the D/LPR into Russia is taking place de facto because Ukraine has done everything possible to push us toward the Russian Federation".⁴⁷ In 2017, he described "integration with Russia" as compatible with the Minsk agreements. "Our Ukrainian opponents saw the process of integration with Russia as a violation of Minsk. On the contrary, we are fulfilling the Minsk agreements. ... The law on special status stipulates free cooperation in cultural and economic spheres with regions of the Russian Federation, and we are moving ahead in that format".⁴⁸

In fact, Pushilin, like his LPR counterpart, is more acquiescent than his predecessor. While he continues to make occasional public comments invoking Novorossiia and the possibility of joining Russia, he recognises that Moscow does not share this goal. He still talks of "integration" with Russia, but in ways that suggest anything from close economic ties to a union. He has also described integration as civic cooperation – if formal integration is not possible, he has said, then the DPR and Russia could cooperate in the areas of culture, labour and sports.⁴⁹ Instead of pushing hard for annexation, Pushilin now echoes Moscow's line that the D/LPR should pursue closer cooperation with Russia while remaining formally inside Ukraine. "The majority of DPR residents want full-fledged integration into Russia. For different reasons that is currently unrealistic", he said in September 2018.⁵⁰

For his part, LPR head Pasechnik still pays homage to the "Russian world" concept. Yet he does so in loose terms that bow to the Kremlin's prerogatives: "Today there are boundaries between Russia and Donbas, and formally we are different states. But in our hearts and minds we feel that we are not only part of the Russian world, but part of Russia itself".⁵¹ The D/LPR's new leadership thus also represents a gradual evolution away from the separatists' aspirations to join Russia.

B. *The Splintered Movement*

Moscow's abandonment of plans to create Novorossiia as well as its subsequent assertion of control over the D/LPR leadership have widened fissures among the activists who led the early Donbas demonstrations. Unlike the de facto republics' leadership, this movement is varied in vocation and enjoys some backing from the local population. It includes peaceful organisers and municipal administrators as well as people who took up arms against Kyiv. The movement's grassroots element is

⁴⁷ See Pushilin's televised remarks, video, YouTube, 14 February 2016.

⁴⁸ People's Council of the Donetsk People's Republic website, 26 October 2017.

⁴⁹ «Донбасс однозначно держит курс на Россию» ["Donbas unequivocally holds a course toward Russia,"], *News Front*, 27 September 2018. *News Front* is a pro-DPR news agency.

⁵⁰ «Пушилин: 'Второго тура выборов главы ДНР не будет'» ["Pushilin: 'there will be no second round of elections for DPR head'"], *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 20 September 2018.

⁵¹ «Пасечник: сотрудничество с Россией за пять лет дало ЛНР больше, чем десятилетия с Украиной» ["Pasechnik: cooperation with Russia has given the LPR more in five years than Ukraine has in decades"], TASS, 23 October 2018.

now cut off from the D/LPR leadership, which it views as having betrayed the initial cause of Novorossiia, meaning separatist fighters spilled blood in vain.

This grassroots element has complicated and even paradoxical views of Moscow. Former separatist leaders who fit this profile have been sidelined by Moscow and are in opposition to new D/LPR leaders. On the one hand, they still harbour aspirations for unification with Russia, despite Moscow's rejection of these goals. They refer to the territories becoming part of Russia or at least fully independent from Ukraine. On the other, they have become quite critical of Moscow, saying it betrayed Novorossiia. In private conversations, former fighters and de facto officials who were close to Zakharchenko express virulently anti-Kremlin views.⁵²

A few have gone public with deep-seated resentment of the Kremlin and overt disdain for the D/LPR leadership. In January 2018, for instance, Alexander Khodakovsky said in a social media post:

Why is it that I, ... Igor Strelkov and many, many others, including the majority of residents of [areas outside Kyiv's control], ... keep making ... turbulence? We were planning to [be part of] Russia and to be subordinate to Moscow ... and could not even imagine being forced to be subordinate to [the D/LPR leadership].⁵³

In Khodakovsky's eyes, Moscow not only declined to absorb the de facto republics, but it also imposed its own people as leaders to whom he must now answer. He linked those leaders to criminal gangs, before admitting: "We believed in the reasonableness of Moscow, forgetting that there are people there, too, who are prone to making mistakes".⁵⁴

Other former leaders' statements reflect both frustration with the abandonment of the Novorossiia idea and flexibility as to what the de facto republic's future should be. Their views, like those of Russia's proxies, are evolving. Andrei Purgin, a DPR leader sidelined in September 2015 by Moscow, allegedly for being too independent, once saw the territories becoming "part of some subcultural constituent within the Russian civilisational space".⁵⁵ In 2017, he maintained that joining Russia remains a priority for growing numbers of residents in the de facto DPR. "The Russian spring must continue", he said, using the term separatist fighters and their supporters prefer for the Donbas uprisings.⁵⁶ More recently, however, he pointed to "political changes in the near future" that fall short of joining Russia, "for instance, the creation of a neutral government and the formalisation of the territories through the UN Security Council".⁵⁷

As for the tens of thousands of people who took up arms over the last five years, many also dislike their new leaders. The de facto authorities have in effect taken con-

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, former rebel fighters, Russian volunteer, Moscow, March, April and September 2018, April 2019.

⁵³ Khodakovsky's post on the Vkontakte social media network, 9 January 2018.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ «Андрей Пургин: Главные проблемы ДНР – мотивация и образ будущего» ["Andrei Purgin: DPR's main problems are motivation and a vision for the future"], *Eurasia Daily*, 30 January 2018.

⁵⁶ «Андрей Пургин: Русская Весна должна быть продолжена» ["Andrei Purgin: The Russian spring must be continued"], *Svobodnaya Pressa*, 17 January 2017.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Donetsk, May 2018.

trol of the original militias that fought Kyiv's forces in 2014, but doing so was difficult amid infighting among separatist factions. "There is no more militia", said a disgruntled former Ukrainian rebel fighter in Strelkov's regiment who subsequently fled to Moscow. "They won't even let them shoot back anymore".⁵⁸ (While probably an overstatement, this last remark does reflect widespread feelings that Moscow plays a constraining role.) Many fighters cling to the goals for which they fought, killed and died – independence from Ukraine and integration with Russia. Perhaps even more importantly, absent an amnesty or relocation to Russia (which some may reject), they see no option but to keep fighting. "What do you do with 40,000 people who believe that, once they put down their arms, they will all be shot or arrested?", said a former Luhansk activist and politician close to the LPR. "Of course, they are going to fight to the death".⁵⁹

These sentiments in effect limit what Moscow can and cannot force the separatists to do. For example, Moscow can demand a ceasefire, but it may well find that its proxies lack sufficient control over the militias to stop the shooting.

C. *The Voiceless Population*

The popular mood in areas of eastern Ukraine outside Kyiv's control appears ambivalent about the region's political future. What emerges from (admittedly limited) polls and interviews is that the conflict has left people both alienated from Kyiv and disappointed with Moscow. Locals are tired of the war and appear ready to side with anyone who offers a plausible plan for fixing infrastructure, supplying aid and resolving the question of the region's political status.

According to a rare poll of D/LPR residents, conducted in late 2016, 54 per cent of the 1,021 respondents felt less Ukrainian than before the events of 2013-2016, while 38 per cent reported no change in their sense of belonging. Fewer than half (44 per cent) wanted to join Russia: 33 per cent said they favoured autonomy within Russia, while another 11 per cent favoured joining Russia without any special status. A majority (55 per cent) wanted to remain in Ukraine, either with regional autonomy (35 per cent) or without (20 per cent).⁶⁰

That said, Crisis Group's recent interviews suggest that many residents lack strong feelings one way or another, stressing that they would accept whatever arrangement brought security.⁶¹ "We don't care anymore who takes us – Russia or Ukraine – we just need to be somewhere", a pensioner crossing the line of separation near Luhansk told Crisis Group.⁶² "I'd be happy to be part of Russia, and I wasn't unhappy in Ukraine", a pensioner from Donetsk remarked. "But you know where I really want to live? The Soviet Union".⁶³ These views – including the allusion to the Soviet

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, April 2019.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, LPR member, Moscow, March 2018.

⁶⁰ Gwendolyn Sasse, "The Donbas – Two Parts, or Still One? The Experience of War through the Eyes of the Regional Population", Centre for East European and International Studies, May 2017.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, areas along the contact line, 2017-2018.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, pensioner, Starobilsk, December 2017.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, pensioner, Mariupol, May 2018.

Union as a benchmark for social security – echoed those expressed by other residents in Donbas in 2018.⁶⁴

Those who oppose reintegration cite mistrust of the Ukrainian government rather than enthusiasm for the de facto republics' leaders. They rarely display a coherent vision for what life in an independent state or Russia would look like. “My wife is for Ukraine”, a factory worker from Luhansk explained, “but I’m for the LPR because, well, you know, we’ve got to support it. We’re under attack”.⁶⁵

People cite concerns that reflect both their first-hand experiences and tropes common in pro-Kremlin and “official” D/LPR media, notably the supposed ubiquity of state-sponsored, far-right violence in Ukraine and the perception that Kyiv is the aggressor. In the words of one Luhansk pensioner, who said a sniper had killed her non-combatant son, “[then-Ukrainian President Petro] Poroshenko is now saying we’re a crucial part of Ukraine – so then why did they kill so many of us?”⁶⁶ While Russian propaganda distorts people’s perceptions, five years of policies from Kyiv have felt to many locals like an intentional effort to cut them off as punishment for ostensibly supporting the separatist cause. Those policies, while not necessarily intentionally discriminatory, have in effect erected legal, political, economic and ideological barriers isolating Ukrainian citizens in rebel-held territories.⁶⁷

In early 2017, a blockade initiated by armed vigilantes on the government-controlled side blocked the anthracite coal trade between Ukraine and the D/LPR. Kyiv initially condemned but then dramatically expanded the blockade, banning all trade with people or businesses located in the statelets. This measure further weakened the D/LPR’s economies and worsened the region’s humanitarian crisis. It also has had profound consequences for remaining links, whether political or economic, that Ukraine had with people in rebel-held areas. According to a Ukrainian lawmaker with a strong record of opposing Moscow’s actions in eastern Ukraine, “before the blockade we had a foot in the door”.⁶⁸ Whereas beforehand tens of thousands of Donbas inhabitants received salaries in Ukrainian currency from Ukrainian employers to whom they felt some loyalty, the embargo on trade, which means that Ukrainian-owned companies cannot legally operate in the D/LPR, rendered such employment impossible. After the blockade, the lawmaker said, the door is shut.⁶⁹

The blockade, combined with the years of war, has led to shifts in local alignments and allegiances. New leaders have emerged in the economic, social and humanitarian spheres, some of them women. At the same time, some who were influential before the war also remain relevant.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ See Crisis Group Europe Report N°252, “*Nobody Wants Us*”: *The Alienated Civilians of Eastern Ukraine*, 1 October 2018.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, factory worker, Sievierodonetsk, December 2017.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, pensioner, Sievierodonetsk, November 2018. Poroshenko was president from 2014-2019. He lost the 21 April 2019 runoff election to Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

⁶⁷ See Crisis Group Report, “*Nobody Wants Us*”, op. cit.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Rada deputy, Kyiv, February 2019.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Kyiv, Avdiivka, Sievierodonetsk, Mariupol, Kramatorsk, Moscow and Rostov-on-Don, October 2017, December 2017, April 2018, September 2018, March 2019 and April 2019. See also Malyarenko and Wolff, op. cit.; Tetyana Malyarenko, “Evolving Dynamics and Conflict Potential in Eastern Ukraine”, Ponars Policy Memo 569, January 2019.

That de facto officials and fighters – the vast majority of whom are Donbas natives – view Ukrainian rhetoric, law and policy as implying that they are not considered citizens generates wider distrust of Kyiv among Donbas residents. For example, Ukraine's 2018 law on temporarily occupied territories defines both statelets as occupied by Russia. This wording can be interpreted to mean that their leaders are not Ukrainian, regardless of their country of origin or citizenship. As for D/LPR fighters, Ukraine's military press service refers to them as "Russian mercenaries" or "occupiers" in daily reports – despite that, according to data collected by sources affiliated with Ukrainian nationalist fighters, those killed on the D/LPR side, at least since the February 2015 ceasefire, have overwhelmingly been Ukrainians.⁷¹ This sort of language affects the local population – if Kyiv does not consider local officials and neighbours who took up arms to be Ukrainian, many residents believe, then it might also regard ordinary civilians as foreigners. Ukrainian aid workers complain that the state treats them as something less than full-fledged citizens because they reside in and travel from rebel-held territories.⁷²

Civilians face exclusion in other aspects of their daily life. One of Kyiv's policies – which the country's Supreme Court deemed unlawful – limits D/LPR residents' access to pensions.⁷³ Given that the only recourse civilians have is to sue to get their pensions reinstated, many continue to live without them. When a long-awaited 2019 legislative amendment extended social subsidies for war veterans to civilians injured in the hostilities, it excluded those hurt while in D/LPR territory.⁷⁴ In April 2019, the social policy minister of President Petro Poroshenko's government said, "everyone who is pro-Ukrainian has long since left", and that he felt "absolutely no pity" regarding the harsh conditions facing those who remained.⁷⁵ D/LPR media seized on his remarks, while not a single key member of that government criticised them.

That some in Kyiv question or even seek to undermine the citizenship of those who took up arms against the Ukrainian state is hardly surprising. But such rhetoric has broader, more pernicious effects, affecting the general civilian population, for whom militants and de facto officials are neighbours and relatives and who hear themselves described by Ukrainians as sympathetic to or complicit in the uprising. It is inconsistent with Kyiv's stated goal of peacefully reintegrating the breakaway territories. It also reinforces the arguments of the separatists themselves that the local population is not, in fact, Ukrainian.

⁷¹ See Cargo200 Donbas, a table which lists members of armed groups and Russian servicemen killed in Donbas, including personal data and circumstances of death. The Ukrainian blogger Necro Mancer compiles the table from open sources. Tweet by Necro Mancer, @666_mancer, 12:18am, 8 October 2018. Mass media widely circulates Necro Mancer's data but the blogger does not reveal their identity for security reasons.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, Ukrainian aid workers, Kyiv, Istanbul, July 2019.

⁷³ See Crisis Group Report, "Nobody Wants Us", op. cit.

⁷⁴ See UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report on the Human Rights Situation 16 November 2018 to 15 February 2019", p. 8.

⁷⁵ See Facebook post by BBC Ukraine journalist Olga Malchevska, 26 April 2019.

V. Toward Unity

A new president in Ukraine could bring fresh opportunities to break the deadlock in Donbas. As Poroshenko's term drew to a close, the Ukrainian government's approach to the parts of the east under separatist control seemed to stagnate. Ukraine's new President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, however, has spoken of a new truce and renewed negotiations with Russia. He and his team have the opportunity to lay the groundwork for the eventual reintegration of rebel-held parts of Donbas.

For Zelenskyy, the worst option of course would be to try to forcibly retake the territories, as an all-out offensive would likely provoke a military response from Moscow and a bloodbath in Donbas. It could even lead Moscow, according to a former Kremlin official, to recognise the statelets' independence, much as it did in 2008 during its war with Georgia over the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁷⁶ The large-scale military option is mainly advocated by nationalists not members of Ukraine's political establishment. But some prominent mainstream politicians refuse to rule it out.⁷⁷ Crisis Group's interviews in Kyiv suggest that some such politicians would prefer attempting a military takeover over granting the rebel-held areas special status or a degree of autonomy that would allow them a veto over Ukrainian policy decisions, whether in foreign policy or on key domestic issues.⁷⁸

In the end, there is no question that Kyiv will have to find a way forward with Moscow, either through both sides implementing their commitments in the Minsk agreements (in whatever order they can agree to) or some new deal that covers much of the same ground. Any plausible settlement will involve the withdrawal of Russian troops, some level of autonomy for eastern Ukraine and the reunification of Ukraine with its east (Crimea would need to be subject to other deals and discussions).

Although Moscow remains the main address for peace talks, there nonetheless are good reasons for Kyiv to do more to rebuild relations with its eastern population. First, it needs to do so if it ever hopes to reintegrate those areas into the Ukrainian body politic. Secondly, the growing divides among Moscow, the original separatists and Donbas's population mean that Moscow's ability to negotiate on behalf of any of these other groups is limited. Russia's proxies now in power in the D/LPR would likely have to agree to whatever Russia promised on their behalf, but they might face substantial discontent from an already suspicious population, including among separatists who might hesitate to lay down their arms, undermining any deal.

In other words, if a deal with the Kremlin is essential for peace in Donbas, in itself it may not be enough. Improved relations between Kyiv and the Donbas population might not bring along the most hardened separatists, but they will make armed resistance to reintegration less likely. And the more supportive the local population is of reintegration, the more likely they are to influence separatist neighbours. In addition, better relations with the Donbas population might strengthen Kyiv's hand in negotiations with Moscow.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, April 2018.

⁷⁷ "Турчинов заявив про силове повернення Донбасу: готові всі передумови" ["Turchinov spoke about forcible return of Donbas: all preconditions for this are ready"], *Politeka*, 14 February 2018.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Ukrainian lawmakers, Kyiv, 2018.

Reaching out directly to leaders in separatist held areas probably does not make sense. Moscow insists on such direct engagement with the D/LPR de facto leaders, over and above that which is already required for the Trilateral Contact group in which they participate. Yet such engagement would not only be unacceptable for Kyiv, but also not differ substantially from talking directly with Moscow, given that D/LPR's de facto leaders are so dependent on the Kremlin.

Instead, President Zelenskyy could attempt to build a constituency for reintegration among eastern Ukraine's population. This constituency might even include people who favoured separatism but who, disillusioned with Moscow, might now be convinced otherwise, particularly if they feel that their safety and that of their families is assured. New local leaders have emerged as the regions have changed over the last six years, including some women. Key to such engagement is building their confidence that Kyiv can protect their interests. As a starting point, the new Ukrainian government could encourage contact between Ukrainians in government-controlled parts of the country with those on the other side of the line of separation. Such channels of communication might allow Ukrainians to reach out to their compatriots in these territories as a starting point to convincing them that their security and their livelihoods matter to Kyiv.

Removing barriers put in place over the last five years is essential. For example, Zelenskyy could ease or lift the economic blockade that now isolates the D/LPR. The new president's representatives have already suggested this might be one possible component of a truce.⁷⁹ It would enable economic links that, in turn, might help rebuild relationships across the front line. In line with the recent decision of its Supreme Court, Kyiv should take steps to enable residents of the D/LPR to receive their pensions by delinking pensions from provable status as internally displaced persons. Kyiv might also consider easing its language laws, which now significantly limit the use of Russian in public life. Such steps would signal to the local population that Kyiv is ready to engage and that it values them as citizens, a prerequisite for any constructive political dialogue.

If Ukraine is to reunify its east, Zelenskyy's government will have to define and forge consensus among Ukrainian parties and within society on what special status, autonomy and/or federalisation could entail. It will need to consider options for amnesties and security guarantees and prepare to address opposition from all sides, including Ukrainian nationalists and former separatists who fear reprisals in the event of reintegration. The challenges are substantial. But improved relations with the people of the east will make solutions to these problems better informed, more responsive to their needs and thus more feasible.

⁷⁹ "Contact Group to discuss lifting Donbas economic blockade during next meeting", TASS, 6 June 2019.

VI. Conclusion

Though Russian actions helped spark the Ukrainian conflict, and have fuelled it since, the situation in Donbas ought not to be narrowly defined as a matter of Russian occupation. In this sense, Kyiv's tendency to conflate Moscow and the de facto leadership has complicated efforts to reintegrate separatist-held areas. If the Ukrainian government wants to peacefully reunify with the rebel-held territories, it cannot avoid engaging the alienated east. Its task in this regard is difficult. But Kyiv would benefit from an approach that serves the interests of all Ukrainian citizens, wherever they live. Over time, such policies could bring a population in the east that feels abandoned by both Russia and Kyiv back into the Ukrainian fold.

Moscow/Kyiv/Brussels, 16 July 2019

Appendix A: Map of Ukraine



Appendix B: Map of Donbas Conflict Zone



Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Special Reports and Briefings

Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

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The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?, Europe Report N°238, 16 March 2016 (also available in Russian).

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Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalisation, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°83, 3 October 2016 (also available in Russian and Kyrgyz).

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Rivals for Authority in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°87, 14 March 2018 (also available in Russian).

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