

**INTERNAL LEGITIMACY AND GOVERNANCE
IN THE ABSENCE OF RECOGNITION:
THE CASES OF THE DONETSK AND LUHANSK “PEOPLE’S REPUBLICS”**

Nataliia Kasianenko

California State University, Fresno

ORCID: 0000-0003-4435-9819

Abstract. *This article examines the strategies used by the self-proclaimed governments of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) and the “Luhansk People’s Republic” (LPR) in achieving internal legitimacy. It specifically highlights the attempts of the two regimes to use direct democracy and the provision of public goods in eastern Ukraine. The article advances the argument in support of the idea that it is possible to attain legitimacy in the absence of external recognition and sovereignty. The people in the self-proclaimed “people’s republics” in the Donbas express the sense of abandonment by the government in Kyiv as they are largely isolated from the rest of Ukraine. The author explores the ability of the two de facto states to govern when it comes to the provision of basic public goods and services for the residents of the DPR and the LPR. Finally, the author discusses the prospects for reintegrating the Donbas by the Ukrainian government.*

Key words: *legitimacy; governance; Donbas; referendum; Ukraine*

Introduction

In the spring of 2014, amid political instability that engulfed Ukraine, pro-Russian rebel leaders in the east of Ukraine (the Donbas) took control of the local government buildings. They opposed the upcoming presidential elections in Ukraine and called for the independence of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) and the “Luhansk People’s Republic” (LPR).¹ Surveys out of eastern Ukraine suggest that 71% of residents in Donetsk and 61% of residents in Luhansk believed the Euromaidan anti-government protests in 2014 were orchestrated by the West (KIIS 2014). The regime change initiated after the ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich created a power vacuum in the Donbas. New regional leaders rose up on the wave of mass opposition to the new political leadership in Kyiv (KIIS 2014). In May 2014, as the separatists clashed with the Ukrainian military, the rebel leadership conducted referendums on the status of the DPR and LPR respectively. While the Ukrainian government and the larger international community condemned these referendums as undemocratic and illegal, their results showed overwhelming public support for independence and spearheaded the efforts of the rebel leadership to consolidate the two polities politically and economically (Zadorozhny & Korotkiy 2015).

Four years later, as the war in the Donbas continues, the death toll now exceeds 13,000 people (UN 2019). The international peace agreements Minsk I (2014) and Minsk II (2015) helped contain the conflict but did not bring the war between the Ukrainian military and the separatists to an end. As the war persists, the region of the Donbas remains divided into the territory of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts controlled by the Ukrainian government and the territories controlled by the self-proclaimed governments of the DPR and the LPR. These unrecognized states are increasingly isolated from the rest of Ukraine. The Ukrainian government engaged in the economic blockade of the DPR and LPR in 2017, while the Russian government has been actively involved in supporting them from the start. The leadership of the DPR/LPR is slowly aligning its political and economic institutions with those of the Russian Federation with the ultimate goal of full integration with Russia in the future. The Russian government is cautious about recognizing the sovereignty of the two polities and only assists them with governance and security with no promises extended regarding future integration (Sasse & Lackner 2018). Although the validity of the 2014 referendums has been questioned by both Ukraine and the West, public opinion surveys and interviews out of the Donbas show that the population of the DPR/LPR feels abandoned by the Ukrainian government (Giuliano 2018) and largely supports the idea of independence from Ukraine (Kudelia 2014). The residents of the Donbas trust the leadership of the two de facto states and remain optimistic about the future integration with Russia (Kudelia 2014). As the DPR and the LPR remain dependent on Russia for security and economic support, the question of legitimacy remains important. This paper focuses on the efforts of the two regimes in obtaining legitimacy in the absence of external recognition through the use of

¹ In this paper, I use several references for the occupied regions of the Donbas, including ‘polities’, ‘de facto states’, ‘unrecognized states’, and ‘people’s republics’.

referendums and the provision of basic public goods and services for DPR/LPR residents. I specifically explore the areas of security, economic governance, and social welfare in the two de facto states.

Degrees of Legitimacy

Academic literature traditionally treats unrecognized states and territories as entities that lack both sovereignty and legitimacy. Yet, in recent years, scholars started to highlight the fact that legitimacy defined as popular consent to the authority of the regime (Weber 1978) is not a binary concept (Caspersen 2012). It is important to distinguish between different degrees of legitimacy and statehood (Clapham 1998; Caspersen 2012). Specifically, Caspersen (2015) examines external and internal legitimacy arguing that non-recognized states may still have internal legitimacy if the population accepts the regime and the regime successfully delivers key public goods. Scholars have long tied legitimacy to the provision of security and basic welfare (Lipset 1960; Berg 2012). Internal legitimacy can be obtained through effective governance and can be facilitated by the external sources of funding and support. At the same time, even incomplete displays of democratic governance in the form of organized elections and referendums may serve to further legitimize the ruling regime in the eyes of the local population. Additionally, if an unrecognized state is dealing with an ongoing conflict or international isolation, political elites may use this situation to develop a narrative of victimhood, which can help unite the majority of the public behind the elites (Caspersen 2015).

Scholars also noted the importance of external support for unrecognized states showing that there are hardly any state entities that are completely isolated from the international system (Berg & Toomla 2009; Ker-Lindsay 2012). Thus, relying on some form of outside assistance may not necessarily translate into statehood, yet it helps achieve internal legitimacy. Attaining this degree of legitimacy is both difficult and important for the survival of unrecognized states.

Using two cases of unrecognized states in the Donbas, I will highlight the efforts of the self-proclaimed leaders of the DPR and the LPR to obtain internal legitimacy through the use of direct democracy mechanisms (referendums) and governance with the assistance of the external patron (Russia). The analysis of legitimacy is methodologically challenging in unrecognized states engaged in conflict. Data collection in the DPR and the LPR is also complicated by the fact that media channels in the two polities are state-controlled, and the two regimes are not releasing official statistics related to their budgets and finances. Yet, the main purpose of this article is to describe key strategies of achieving internal legitimacy in these unrecognized states.

The Use of Referendums

The calls for a referendum on the status of the Donbas were first made in 2004 during the Orange revolution that discredited the President-elect Viktor Yanukovich, a Donbas local. The residents of the Donetsk region disagreed with the victory of the pro-Western

candidate Viktor Yushchenko as Ukraine's president and made calls for the autonomy of the Donbas. The idea of the autonomy was reinforced by the notion that "the Donbas feeds Ukraine" (Haran & Yakovlev 2017). Subsequent (and this time successful) calls for a new referendum came in 2014, following the Euromaidan revolution that ousted Yanukovich from power. After the Euromaidan and the annexation of Crimea, the wave of patriotism swept all over Ukraine with the exception of the Donbas. In fact, a large number of survey respondents (around 25%) in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014 have clearly expressed the desire to separate from Ukraine and join Russia (Vedernikova, Mostova & Rakhmanin 2014).

The referendums on the independent status of Donetsk and Luhansk took place in May of 2014. The rebel leaders have set up hundreds of polling stations with assistance from the Russian government (Vandysheva 2018). The question posed at the referendums directly addressed the political status of the two polities. It was worded in an ambivalent way, "Do you support the Act of state "samostoyatel'nost" of the Donetsk (Luhansk) People's Republic?" The term "samostoyatel'nost" may be interpreted as either complete or partial independence (Dubova & Bigg 2014). Moreover, many people in the Donbas believed that "samostoyatel'nost" meant integration into the Russian state. The responses involved two options of either "yes" or "no" (Matveeva 2016).

In both de facto states, the organizers claimed that the results of the referendum would be accepted regardless of the voter turnout since some voters might be unwilling to participate in the referendum due to security concerns (RIA News 2014a). The declared turnout for both referendums was nonetheless impressive. In the Donetsk region with over 3 million eligible voters, the referendum turnout was almost 75%. The official results showed that nearly 90% of voters supported the independent status of "the Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR 2016). The Luhansk region has about 1.6 million eligible voters. The turnout in the Luhansk oblast was 81% (Vesti 2014). The Russian media confirmed high turnout rates on the referendum day and reportedly interviewed the Donbas residents at the polling stations who expressed support for independence from Ukraine (RIA News 2014b).

The international community has condemned the referendums as illegal and undemocratic. No international observers (beyond the representatives from Russia) were present to monitor the voting process. Additionally, the referendums were organized and run by the separatists themselves. The organizers cited security concerns and had armed soldiers present at some of the polling stations (Giuliano 2015; Chizhova 2014). Western and Ukrainian critics noted the similarities between the Donbas referendums and the referendum in Crimea, organized a few months earlier with the heavy presence of the "little green men", the uniformed Russian soldiers. Other irregularities included the printing of referendum bulletins on regular printers without any additional anti-fraud security measures. The organizers also reportedly allowed voters individuals to cast multiple votes and brought people from Ukraine-controlled regions to vote in the referendum (Zadorozhny & Korotkiy 2015).

While there is little doubt that the turnout numbers were significantly inflated, there is documented evidence from local media and social media suggesting that many

residents of the DPR/LPR participated in the voting. Local observers in the Donbas noted lines of people waiting to vote on the referendum day at most polling stations (LiveJournal 2015). Reports, surveys, and interviews from the rebel-controlled Donbas indicate that most residents supported the idea of either independence for Donetsk and Luhansk or the integration of the Donbas into Russia (Giuliano 2015). Some voters believed the Donbas referendums to be similar to the Crimean referendum, in which people were voting to join Russia as a subject of the federation (Denyer & Nemstova 2014).

While the Ukrainian government and the West primarily blame Russia for the rise of separatism in eastern Ukraine, the residents of the Donbas have clearly expressed their resistance to the Euromaidan protests and their anxiety over the pro-Western policy course of the new Ukrainian government (Giuliano 2015). Public opinion surveys showed that over a quarter of the population in Donetsk and Luhansk expressed support for independence from Ukraine in April of 2014. Another 12–17% of respondents claimed to be unsure about the prospect of independence for the Donbas (KIIS 2014). Documented evidence suggests that the military units that emerged in Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014 were initially made up of local Donbas residents, not the Russian military (Kudelia 2014; Chivers & Sneider 2014). At the same time, the influence of the external patron, Russia, cannot be ignored. The Russian government without a doubt played a role in initiating and supporting the separatist conflict in the east of Ukraine. Still, self-proclaimed leaders of the two polities do not seem to be passive executors of the decisions made in Russia. Reportedly, in 2014, President Putin encouraged the separatist leaders to postpone the independence referendums without success (Traynor et al. 2014). Russia's refusal to formally annex the DPR and the LPR was a major disappointment for the rebel leaders and many residents of the Donbas region (Sakwa 2015). Nevertheless, the two polities continue to seek external recognition and maintain their position of independence from Ukraine.

The results of the referendums gave new legitimacy to the rebel leaders in the region. The day after the referendums took place, the DPR and LPR officially declared independence from Ukraine. Within a week after the referendums, the two polities adopted new constitutions (Zadorozhny & Korotkiy 2015). Despite the absence of international recognition, the leadership of the two de facto states used the referendums as a foundation for gaining internal legitimacy in the DPR and LPR. The leaders of the two polities refute the argument that the DPR and LPR are completely dependent on the Russian government. In 2015, the president of the DPR, Aleksandr Zakharchenko claimed, "Those who say this, do not see the independent will of the Donbas, do not see the ability to make decisions in Donetsk. They think that the destiny of Donbas is decided somewhere outside its borders—in Moscow, Washington, Berlin, Paris ... During the referendum we expressed our will" (DNR 2016c). The declaration of independence from Ukraine also helped reinforce the main ideological narrative in the two de facto states. This narrative of victimhood pictures the peaceful people of the Donbas who used legal procedures to express their desire for self-rule pitted against their main enemy, the Ukrainian government that uses military force and brings destruction to the region

(Matveeva 2016). Yet, internal legitimacy cannot survive on ideology alone. Effective governance and policy-making are critical to maintaining this degree of legitimacy.

External Support and Governance in the DPR/LPR

From the early days of protests in April of 2014, the rebel leaders in the Donbas made a formal commitment to democratic governance and claimed to represent the will of the people. The notion of “people’s republics” was developed by the rebel leaders early on in 2014. The two entities were part of the single political project of Novorossiia (New Russia), which was historically used as a term for the southeastern regions of modern-day Ukraine. The idea of Novorossiia was not supported by the Minsk agreements and the project was soon abandoned by the rebel leaders in the Donbas (Matveeva 2016). Over time and despite the absence of international recognition, the self-proclaimed “people’s republics” have set up major government institutions, including legislative and judicial bodies, as well as law enforcement agencies (Matveeva 2016; UN OHCHR 2015). Speaking in 2016, Zakharchenko highlighted two main tasks of the “Donetsk People’s Republic”. The first task was to focus on local governance by communicating with the residents of Donbas and establishing close ties between the political leaders and the population of the DPR. The second task involved ideological work of promoting major values of the DPR such as “freedom, justice, conscience, equality” (DNR 2017).

In 2015, in another attempt at enhancing internal legitimacy through governance with the help of the external patron, the LPR government started to issue passports of the “Luhansk People’s Republic” to its residents. The passports of the LPR not only allowed entry into Russia but also made it possible for the citizens of the de facto state to apply to Russian universities. In 2016, the government of the DPR followed suit and started issuing its own passports (Dergachev, Holmogorova & Dzyadko 2017).

In an attempt to increase the base of its supporters in the whole region, the government of the DPR started opening special centers for administrative and social assistance to the residents of Ukraine-controlled Donbas. These centers offered humanitarian help to individuals who needed medical and financial assistance or wanted to reconnect with their family or friends in the DPR/LPR (HPDPR 2017). The humanitarian program also involved securing thousands of spots for university students in the universities of the DPR. According to Zakharchenko,

“These people are now under the heel of the enemy, they are on the territory controlled by Ukraine, but these are our sisters and brothers...We are one people! Donbas is one country” (DNR 2018b).

These calls for unity and consolidation may have been welcomed by the people of the Ukraine-controlled Donbas who were targeted by the Ukrainian media as Moscow loyalists and traitors.

Significant gaps remain when it comes to governance in the occupied Donbas. The first gap involves the status of the two polities. The leadership and the residents of the DPR/LPR seem to be unsure whether the goal of independence from Ukraine is state sovereignty and international recognition or whether it is the future integration into the

Russian Federation. Specifically, the leaders of the DPR claim to be waiting for the repetition of the “Crimean scenario” in the Donbas (DNR 2017). In the spring of 2017, Zakharchenko announced that the people of Donbas would be celebrating the victory of reintegration with Russia in the near future (DNR 2018a). LPR’s leader, Leonid Pasechnik similarly argued,

“Our goal is the construction of strong and independent Republic capable of ensuring a decent life for its citizens, the preservation of the people and their security in a single political, cultural, economic and civilizational space with the Russian Federation” (NAH 2018).

In any of these two scenarios (sovereignty or integration), attaining internal legitimacy is necessary for the survival of the de facto states.

The centralization of political power in the DPR/LPR has been another major challenge since 2014 when multiple local rebel leaders exercised control over different areas of the Donbas representing horizontal government structures in the two polities.

“The self-declared ‘people’s mayors’ of different Donbas towns were local political opportunists who used the implosion of authority to claim power rather than members of a clandestine organization coordinated from a single center” (Kudelia 2014: 6).

The rebels in the DPR/LPR also pursued different strategies of separatism. In the DPR, the local leaders announced independence from Ukraine and then organized a referendum a month later. In the LPR, the rebels have announced independence only after the May 2014 referendum (Kudelia 2014). The Russian government has therefore made efforts to centralize local political power by helping organize elections in the DPR and LPR in the fall of 2014 (Robinson 2016; Matveeva 2016). These elections have “turned into confidence votes for Zakharchenko (79%) and Igor Plotnitsky (63%) identified by Kremlin as the most suitable candidates” for the leadership of the “people’s republics” (Matveeva 2016: 38). The representatives to the legislative bodies (People’s Councils) were chosen from major civic associations in the region. Both councils have elected members from two civic associations with 100 deputies representing the DPR and 50 deputies in the People’s Council of the LPR (DNR 2016a). While these elections might not have been completely free and fair, they certainly helped with the centralization of power in the region and served to further legitimize the leadership of the two de facto states (Matveeva 2016). The Minsk II agreement in 2015 highlighted the need for a future agreement between the government of Ukraine and the political leaders in Donbas to set up the procedures for local elections in the region. Yet, the government of Ukraine has been unwilling to negotiate with the rebels that are labeled as terrorists, not popular representatives (Katchanovski 2016; Robinson 2016).

I will now turn to the discussion of specific aspects of governance in the DPR/LPR, including security, economics, and social welfare. The analysis is based on the diverse body of sources, including the official reports published by the governments of the two de facto states, academic sources, the local Donbas media, as well as social media out of the region.

Security

Defense has been a priority for the local leaders in the DPR/LPR since April of 2014 when the protesters took over the local administration buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk. After declaring independence from Ukraine, the rebels set up regional military units (people's armies) to maintain control and security within the borders of the de facto states (Sakwa 2015). The people's army was created on the basis of voluntary paramilitary units. At the time, local military battalions coexisted with the Chechen, Serbian and Hungarian military units that operated in the Donbas (Beroyeva 2016). The newly minted army of the DPR was small, yet over the years the local government had the ability to recruit thousands more for the military service (DNR 2018b). To maintain order and peace in the major cities, the government of the DPR also created local patrol units. These units established control over the military personnel and seized weapons from individuals who did not have the necessary permits (Grigoryuk 2015). As a result, violence in the DPR and LPR has declined significantly and stability has returned to the major cities outside of the conflict zone (Matveeva 2016).

The two de facto states have also introduced the curfew system from 11 PM to 5 AM. The curfew was initially justified because of the security concerns in the region. However, as the rates of violence have declined over the years, many residents feel frustrated with the enforcement of the curfew and the penalties that curfew violations involve. In the DPR, the first curfew violation involves an arrest until next morning. The repeated offense entails a 15-day arrest. As a result of the curfew system, hundreds of people are arrested every night in the DPR. The enforcement of curfew is less strict in the LPR with violators being subject to a \$10–30 fine (DN 2018). Due to the curfew system, taxis, ambulances, and pharmacies are largely unavailable at night, which complicates the lives of the residents of the DPR/LPR (DN 2017). Overall, the authorities were able to restore peace in the major cities yet problems with security remain. Ultimately, the leadership of the DPR/LPR cannot guarantee the safety of the Donbas residents without a strict curfew system in place.

Economy

The military conflict in the Donbas contributed to the economic downturn in the region. Local businesses were either moving out of the Donbas or completely ceasing their operations. Economic production was further disrupted by the economic blockade the Ukrainian government has imposed on the DPR/LPR in 2014 (Matveeva 2016). By 2015, all bank branches in the occupied Donbas were shut down. The residents of the two polities were unable to collect pensions or access their bank accounts. Local stores and businesses did not accept electronic payments and instead relied on cash. Currency shortages led to a reliance on payments in the U.S. dollars, the euros, along with the Russian rubles and the Ukrainian hryvnias (Silchenko 2015).

The new regimes initiated sweeping changes to bring the DPR/LPR out of the economic crisis. Central banks were created in 2015 (Beroyeva 2016). A year later, the

residents of the Donbas could make online payments through the newly created web banking system (DNR 2017). The separatist leaders quickly took control over the coal mines of the DPR/LPR and announced growing levels of coal production in the “people’s republics” (DNR 2016c). In 2016, both de facto states adopted the law on nationalization, giving the regimes formal authority to impose temporary government control over the businesses (Beroyeva 2016). Yet, the authorities do not have full control over the economic activity in the DPR/LPR. The territories of the two de facto states do not have a large base for taxation since a portion of big industries located within the DPR/LPR still pay taxes to the government of Ukraine (Skorik 2017a). According to Matveeva,

“Industrial connections with the mainland are not wholly disrupted, and there are actors on both sides who are interested in their preservation” (Matveeva 2016: 42).

Despite Ukraine’s trade blockade, the two polities continue to receive contraband goods from the Ukrainian territory. The contraband out of Ukraine is risky and requires bribing both the Ukrainian and the “people’s republics” customs authorities. As a result, the volume of trade is rather low leading to the shortage of consumer goods in the DPR/LPR. The two de facto states largely rely on trade with Russia. Trade mostly flows through South Ossetia, the only territorial entity that has officially recognized the sovereignty of the DPR/LPR. Business contracts are reportedly signed between the exporters in the occupied Donbas and the importers in South Ossetia, then South Ossetia transfers the imports to Russia. The same mechanism works for money transfers out of Russia and into the DPR/LPR (Beroyeva 2016).

The leaders of the DPR/LPR do not publicize information about the official state budgets arguing that this lack of transparency is necessary in times of war. According to some estimates from the DPR, around 50% of the budget is spent on pensions and other social welfare payments, and around 25% of the budget is spent on salaries of state officials and government employees (Skorik 2017a). Budgetary lines were set up for the reconstruction of roads, bridges, and homes in the Donbas (Skorik 2017a). Specifically, the DPR’s construction program has focused on building hundreds of new homes to replace the apartments damaged during the conflict (DNR 2016e).

Despite the absence of any documented evidence, there are grounds to doubt that the DPR/LPR are economically independent. In highlighting the status of the DPR, Zakharchenko argued,

“We are an economically self-sufficient state with our own history and culture, with our own development path” (Zakharchenko 2018).

However, Russia offers significant financial support to the two de facto states. Government officials in the DPR estimate that “70% of the republic’s budget expenditure is covered by Moscow” (Matveeva 2016: 42). Other estimates suggest that Russia covers closer to 82% of the local budgetary expenses in the DPR/LPR (Skorik 2017a). Every year, the Russian government sends billions of euros in humanitarian aid to cover salaries and social welfare payments in the Donbas (Matveeva 2016; Skorik 2017a). Over 30 million euros a month are sent towards the pension payments alone. Additionally, Moscow sends military assistance to the Donbas in the form of ammunition, oil and natural gas. Some estimates suggest that over 0.6% of the Russian annual budget is spent on financial

assistance to the DPR/LPR (Donbass News 2017). At the same time, the Russian government is putting pressure on the local leadership in the two republics to become financially independent. Reportedly, the assistance from Moscow has declined over the years, as the Russian government prioritized economic development in the Crimea over the formally independent Donbas (Skorik 2017a). In general, the two de facto states are struggling to maintain economic independence from Ukraine and likely rely on the Russian government to cover the majority of their social expenditures.

Social Welfare Programs

Both the DPR and the LPR formally advance the idea that the state should work for the benefit of the people, suggesting that the focus on social programs should guide the political and economic development of the “people’s republics” (Zakharchenko 2018). Yet, in reality, the salaries and pensions in the DPR/LPR are quite low. In 2017, the average monthly salary in Donetsk was between 150 and 200 U.S. dollars (Skorik 2017b). In the LPR, the local government stated even lower average salaries in 2018, around 110 U.S. dollars for doctors and 75 U.S. dollars for teachers (LIC 2018). When it comes to pensions, the 2016 minimum pension was set at 39 U.S. dollars in the DPR (DNR, 2018). The regimes regularly announce minimum wage and pension increases in all of the major government sectors (DNR 2018). Still, average salaries and pensions lag behind those in Russia (Silchenko 2016). Most residents of the DPR/LPR have to rely on either humanitarian aid or additional pension payments from Ukraine.

As a result of the ongoing conflict, the Ukrainian government officially stopped sending pension payments to the residents of the DPR/LPR. The pensions are available only to those residents who cross the border into the Ukrainian territory and register with the government authorities in Ukraine. This registration requires regular renewals and frequent travel to the Ukrainian territory, which could be quite dangerous for the residents of the Donbas. Once registered, the pensioners obtain debit cards, which cannot be used inside the DPR/LPR to cash out the pensions. Thus, some people rely on local entrepreneurs who travel to Ukraine-controlled territories to cash out pensions in exchange for a fee (Silchenko 2015). The difficulty of receiving pensions from Ukraine has enraged and alienated many residents of the self-proclaimed “people’s republics”. When interviewed in 2016, one pensioner in the DPR argued, “I have worked for this country for 40 years and it is now sending me bombs instead of pensions” (Beroyeva 2016).

The ability of the unrecognized regimes to obtain internal legitimacy through provision of social benefits is complicated since the residents of the two polities continue relying on humanitarian aid from private foundations, international non-governmental organizations, and the Russian government. Reportedly, regular humanitarian aid from Russia helps deliver food packages to large families, state schools, hospitals, and orphanages (DNR 2017).

Conclusion: Prospects for Reintegrating the Donbas?

The 2014 referendums in the Donbas led to the creation of the DPR and LPR and helped enhance the internal legitimacy of the self-proclaimed leaders in the two polities. Yet, these direct democracy campaigns did not immediately result in improved governance for the residents of the Donbas. The de facto states struggle when it comes to self-governance, independence and the ability to provide basic public goods and services. What does it mean for the Ukrainian government? Does the government in Kyiv have an ability to gain the support of the Donbas residents and successfully reintegrate the region?

Since the start of the war in the Donbas the Ukrainian government labeled the conflict as the “anti-terrorist operation” and largely disregarded political and economic concerns of the local residents. As a result, Ukraine’s military actions were severely undermined by the lack of local support in the Donbas.

“Surrounded by locals, the soldiers surrendered their vehicles or retreated back to their bases” (Kudelia 2014: 3).

This lack of political legitimacy undermines the prospects for reintegration of the Donbas. Although the new leaders of the DPR/LPR are struggling when it comes to governance, the government in Kyiv was unable to step in and provide help to the residents of the occupied territories. The Ukrainian government lost access to the occupied territories of the DPR/LPR. Still, some pro-Ukrainian residents of the occupied regions were disappointed with the fact that the Ukrainian leadership was isolating the Donbas economically and politically.

“Medical staff, teachers, social care workers and prison staff have not been paid by Kiev since July 2014, although many continued with their duties” (Matveeva 2016: 41).

In addition, the Ukrainian government has lost legitimacy in the region as a result of the information campaign to discredit Ukraine’s political leadership. Local media campaigns advanced anti-Ukraine slogans such as “Will not forget, will not forgive!” to emphasize the use of violence by the Ukrainian military and the resulting civilian casualties in the Donbas. Public opinion surveys from the region and the return of the internally displaced individuals to the Donbas suggest that the reintegration with Ukraine would be a challenging task (Matveeva 2016). Even if Russia decides to abandon the DPR and LPR and ceases all humanitarian assistance to the de facto states, it is unlikely that the Ukrainian government will regain its influence in the region. Thus, the ideological or “soft” power approach in the occupied regions is paramount for Ukraine to obtain legitimacy in the Donbas. Successful reintegration will not be possible without the popular support for the idea that “the Donbas is Ukraine” both in the DPR/LPR and in the rest of Ukraine (Haran & Yakovlev 2017). Considering the difficulty of the task, power-sharing or autonomy presents the most optimistic political outcome for Ukraine in the current stalemate in the east.

Bibliography

- Berg, E. (2012). Parent states versus secessionist entities; measuring political legitimacy in Cyprus, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Europe-Asia Studies* 64(7): 1271–1296.
- Berg, E., & Toomla, R. (2009). Forms of normalisation in the quest for de facto statehood. *The International Spectator* 44(4): 27–45.
- Berojeva, N. (2016, August 23). Zhivoy Donetsk, Ukraina [Live Donetsk, Ukraine], *LiveJournal*, <https://varlamov.ru/1907750.html> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Caspersen, N. (2015). Degrees of legitimacy: Ensuring internal and external support in the absence of recognition. *Geoforum* 66: 184–192.
- Caspersen, N. (2012). *Unrecognized states: The struggle for sovereignty in the modern international system*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Chivers, C. J., Sneider, N. (2014). Behind the masks in Ukraine, many faces of rebellion. *The New York Times* May 3, 2014: 3.
- Chizhova, L. (2014). Donbas do i posle referendumu [Donbas before and after the referendum], *Radio Svoboda*, May 21, 2014, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/25393023.html> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Clapham, C. (1998). Degrees of statehood. *Review of International Studies* 24(2): 143–157.
- Denyer, S., Nemstova, A. (2014). Eastern Ukrainians vote for self-rule in referendum opposed by West. *The Washington Post* May 11, 2014: 1.
- Dergachev, V., Holmogorova, V., & Dzyadko, T. (2017). Rassledovaniye RBK: Kak v Rossii priznali pasporta DNR i LNR [Investigation of RBK: How the passports of DPR and LPR were recognized in Russia], *RBK*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/02/2017/587cf9159a7947e5f86ee045> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DN. (2018). V DNR rasskazali kogda otmenyat komendantskiy chas [The DPR announced when the curfew would be canceled], *DN*, May 8, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.dnews.dn.ua/news/675479> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DN. (2017). Hotya by kak v LNR: Zhiteli prosyat oslabit komendantskiy chas v DNR [At least like in the LPR: Residents are asking to lighten the curfew in the DPR], *DN*, September 17, 2017, <https://dnews.dn.ua/news/646106> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DNR. (2018a). Hronologiya stanovleniya Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [The chronology of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic], *Official Website of the DPR*, March 3, 2018, <http://letopis.DNR-online.ru/2018/03/03/xronologiya-stanovleniya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki-sobytiya-marta-2017-goda-my-pobediteli-i-eto-nasha-sudba-aleksandr-zaxarchenko/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DNR. (2018b). Hronologiya stanovleniya Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [The chronology of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic], *Official Website of the DPR*, April 12, 2018, <http://letopis.dnr-online.ru/2018/04/12/xronologiya-stanovleniya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki-sobytiya-aprelya-2017-goda-my-odin-narod-donbass-eto-odna-strana-glava-dnr-aleksandr-zaxarchenko/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DNR. (2017). Hronologiya stanovleniya Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [The chronology of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic], *Official Website of the DPR*, March 6, 2017, <http://letopis.DNR-online.ru/2017/03/06/xronologiya-stanovleniya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki-sobytiya-marta-2016-goda-vtoraya-vesna-vsyo-toj-zhe-vojni/> (accessed 1 October 2019).

- DNR. (2016a). Hronologiya stanovleniya Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [The chronology of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic], *Official Website of the DPR*, February 20, 2016, <http://letopis.dnr-online.ru/2016/02/20/xronologiya-stanovleniya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki-sobytiya-oktyabrya-2014-goda-respublika-perexodit-na-doneckoe-vremya/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DNR. (2016c). Hronologiya stanovleniya Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [The chronology of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic], *Official Website of the DPR*, November 4, 2016, <http://letopis.dnr-online.ru/2016/11/04/xronologiya-stanovleniya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki-sobytiya-noyabrya-2015-goda-noyabr-novye-rubezhi-i-novye-dostizheniya-nezavisimoj-respubliki/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DNR. (2016b). Hronologiya stanovleniya Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [The chronology of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic], *Official Website of the DPR*, April 5, 2016, <http://letopis.dnr-online.ru/2016/04/05/xronologiya-stanovleniya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki-sobytiya-aprelya-2015-goda-respublika-stroitsya/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DNR. (2016e). Hronologiya stanovleniya Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [The chronology of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic], *Official Website of the DPR*, December 2, 2016, <http://letopis.DNR-online.ru/2016/12/02/xronologiya-stanovleniya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki-sobytiya-dekabrya-2015-goda-nezavisimaya-respublika-vstrechaet-svoj-vtoroj-novyy-god/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DNR. (2016). Hronologiya stanovleniya Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [The chronology of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic], *Official Website of the DPR*, February 10, 2016, <http://letopis.dnr-online.ru/2016/02/10/xronologiya-stanovleniya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki-sobytiya-iyunya-2014-goda-dnr-obretaet-konstituciyu/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DNR. (2018). Hronologiya stanovleniya Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [The chronology of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic], *Official Website of the DPR*, January 19, 2018, <http://letopis.dnr-online.ru/2018/01/19/xronologiya-stanovleniya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki-sobytiya-yanvaryaya-2017-goda-k-sozhaleniyu-vojna-eshhe-ne-zakonchilas-i-nam-predstoit-dokazyvat-chto-my-imeem-pravo-sami-opredelyat/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- DNR. (2017a). Hronologiya stanovleniya Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki [The chronology of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic], *Official Website of the DPR*, January 10, 2017, <http://letopis.DNR-online.ru/2017/01/10/xronologiya-stanovleniya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki-sobytiya-yanvaryaya-2016-goda-v-respublike-chtyat-pogibshix-okruzhayut-zabotoj-zhivushhix/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Donbass News. (2017). Sekretniy budzhet "DNR" mozhet ostatsya bez rossiyskih vlivaniy? [The secret budget of the "DPR" may be left without the Russian assistance?], *Donbass News*, October 6, 2017, <http://novosti.dn.ua/article/6867-sekretnyy-byudzhet-DPR-mozhet-ostatsya-bez-rossyyskykh-vlyvanyy> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Dubova, V., Bigg, C. (2014). Pro-Russians in Eastern Ukraine gear up for self-rule referendums. *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, May 9, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pro-russians-eastern-ukraine-prepare-self-rule-referendum/25379398.html> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Giuliano, E. (2015). The social bases of support for self-determination in East Ukraine. *Ethnopolitics* 14(5): 513–522.
- Giuliano, E. (2018). Who supported separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and popular opinion at the start of the Ukraine crisis. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34(2–3): 158–178.
- Grigoryuk, D. (2015). Voennaya policiya DNR [Military policy of the DPR]. *Novorossiya*, July 8, 2015, <https://novorosinform.org/401348> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Haran, O., & Yakovlyev, M. (2017). *Constructing a political nation: Changes in the attitudes of Ukrainians during the war in the Donbas*. Kyiv: Stylos Publishing.

- Katchanovski, I. (2016). The separatist war in Donbas: A violent break-up of Ukraine? *European Politics and Society* 17(4): 473–489.
- HPDPR. (2017). V centrakh socialnoy pomoshi i administrativnyh uslug zhiteliu vremenno podkontrolnoi Kievu teritorii Donbasa prodolzhayut poluchat pomosh [In the centers of social assistance and administrative services the residents of temporarily Kyiv-controlled territory of the Donbas continue to receive assistance], *Humanitarian Program on Donbas People Reunification*, February 17, 2017, <http://gum-centr.su/news/v-centrah-socialnoi-pomosi-i-administrativnyh-uslug-ziteli-vremenno-podkontrolnoi-kievu> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Ker-Lindsay, J. (2012). *The foreign policy of counter secession*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- KIIS. (2014). The views and opinions of the residents of South-Eastern regions of Ukraine, *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology*, April 2014, <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=news&id=258> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Kudelia, S. (2014). Domestic Sources of the Donbas Insurgency. *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 351, September 2014, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/domestic-sources-donbas-insurgency> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- LIC. (2018). Povysheniye pensii na 10% kosnetsya vseh pensionerov Respubliki [The rise in pensions by 10% will apply to all of the pensioners of the Republic], *Luhansk Information Center*, June 12, 2018, <http://lug-info.com/news/one/povyshenie-pensii-na-10-kosnetsya-vsekh-pensionerov-respubliki-minsotspolitiki-lnr-35991> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Lipset, S.M. (1960). *Political man: The social bases of politics*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- LiveJournal. (2015). Godovshina referendumu v DNR i LNR [The anniversary of the referendum in the DPR and LPR], *LiveJournal*, May 11, 2015, <https://friend.livejournal.com/1892028.html> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Matveeva, A. (2016). No Moscow stooges: identity polarization and guerrilla movements in Donbass. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16(1): 25–50.
- NAH. (2018). LDNR pokazhut na chto sposobny [The LDPR will show what they're capable of], *Novostnoye Agenstvo Har'kov*, May 13, 2018, <https://nahnews.org/1003735-IDPR-pokazhut-na-chto-sposobny-pasechnik-nazval-glavnoe-uslovie-dlya-nalazhivaniya-otnoshenii-s-ukrainoi> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- RIA News. (2014a). Na yugo-vostoke Ukrainy idet golosovaniye na referendum. [Referendum voting is taking place in the south-east of Ukraine], *RIA News*, May 11, 2014, <https://ria.ru/world/20140511/1007319429.html> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- RIA News. (2014b). Referendum v Slavyanske i Kramatorske proshel aktivno, otmetil chlen SPCh [The referendum in Slavyansk and Kramatorsk was active, noted the member of the HRC], *RIA News*, May 11, 2014, <https://ria.ru/world/20140511/1007394602.html> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Robinson, P. (2016). Russia's role in the war in Donbass, and the threat to European security. *European Politics and Society* 17(4): 506–521.
- Sakwa, R. (2015). *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the borderlands*. London, UK: I.B. Tauris.
- Sasse, G., Lackner, A. (2018). War and identity: the case of the Donbas in Ukraine. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34(2–3): 139–157.
- Silchenko, V. (2015). Donetsk, chast 1 [Donetsk, part 1], *LiveJournal*, February 18, 2015, <https://varlamov.ru/1279197.html> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Skorik, M. (2017a). Kak dela delayutsya. Na chem derzhatsya ekonomika i finansy DNR i LNR [How business is made. What supports the economy and the finances of DPR and LPR], *SpektrPress*, February 8, 2017, <http://spektr.press/kak-dela-delayutsya-na-chem-derzhatsya-ekonomika-i-finansy-DNR-i-LNR/> (accessed 1 October 2019).

- Skorik, M. (2017b). Chto pochem na Donbase. Po kakim schetam rasplachivayutsya zhiteli DNR i LNR. [How much are things in the Donbas. What accounts the residents of DNR and LNR use], *SpektrPress*, January 17, 2017, <https://spektr.press/chto-pochem-na-donbasse-po-kakim-schetam-rasplachivayutsya-zhiteli-dnr-i-lnr/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Traynor, I., Walker, S., Salem, H., Lewis, P. (2014). Putin says Eastern Ukraine referendum on autonomy should be postponed, *The Guardian*, May 8, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/07/ukraine-crisis-putin-referendum-autonomy-postponed> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- UN OHCHR. (2015). *11th report on the human rights situation in Ukraine*. Geneva: United Nations Office of High Commissioner on Human Rights (UN OHCHR).
- UN Meetings Coverage. (2019). Senior officials urge steps to make Eastern Ukraine ceasefire irreversible, telling Security Council Minsk Accords remain largely unimplemented, UN Official Website, February 12, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13698.doc.htm> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Vandyshva, O. (2018). Referendum sostoyalsia [Referendum took place]. Expert Online, *Expert.Ru*, November 20, 2018, <http://expert.ru/2014/05/11/referendum-v-donbasse-sostoyalsya/> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Vedernikova, I., Mostova, Y., Rakhmanin, S. (2014). Southeast: A branch of our tree. *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*, April 18, 2014: 1–2.
- Vesti. (2014). Za nezavisimost LNR progolosovali pochti 100% izbirateley [Almost 100% of voters supported the independence of the LPR], *Vesti.UA*, May 12, 2014, <https://vesti-ukr.com/donbass/51220-zanezavisimost-lnr-progolosovali-pochti-100-izbiratelej> (accessed 1 October 2019).
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zadorozhny, O., Korotkyi, T. (2015). Legal assessment of the Russian Federation's policy in the context of the establishment and activities of terrorist organizations «Donetsk People's Republic» («DPR») and «Lugansk People's Republic» («LPR») in Eastern Ukraine. *European Political and Law Discourse* 2(1): 8–18.
- Zakharchenko, A. (2018). Aleksandr Zakharchenko: "Strategiya razvitiya Respubliki budet razrabatyvatsya narodom" [Aleksandr Zakharchenko: "The strategy of the republic's development will be designed by the people"], *The Official Website of Alexander Zakharchenko*, March 1, 2018, <https://av-zakharchenko.su/inner-article/Stati/Aleksandr-Zaharchenko-Strategiya-razvitiya-Respubliki2/> (accessed 1 October 2019).