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## DONBAS IS BECOMING A NO-MAN'S LAND

### PRESSURES TO FREEZE THE STATUS QUO ARE RISING

*On the eve of the third anniversary of Minsk, both Kyiv and Moscow are increasingly helpless about the future of Donbas.*

There has been discussion on the decreasing interest of the West towards Ukraine and, in particular, towards the conflict in Donbas. However, developments in Russia and Ukraine indicate that the public interest towards Donbas and its political role is diminishing in these countries as well.

Since 2014, Donbas has been the symbol of the grievances endured by Ukraine as almost 11,000 people have been killed and more than 1.7 million displaced. Yet for Ukrainians, the armed conflict represented not only pain, but also the hope of bridging national divides and forging a new country.

By 2018, society no longer harbours any such illusions, whereas the government has turned to 'declaratory' governance towards Donbas and increasingly adheres to populist measures.

Since 2016, the Ukrainian government has been toughening its stance on Donbas residents. The procedures for social benefits and pensions are being constantly restricted for Ukrainian citizens in the occupied territories.

In March 2017, Ukraine's Security and Defence Council approved the economic blockade of the occupied territories, even though large-scale smuggling thrives. As trade is blocked and pensions remain unpaid, citizens cannot pay for electricity and water, the delivery of which was occasionally suspended in the occupied parts of Donbas. The law on the reintegration of Donbas, adopted in January 2018, declares Russia the aggressor, yet it lacks any substance to improve the well-being of Ukrainian citizens.

Severe problems persist in Ukraine-controlled territories as

well, as 32% of the Luhansk region and 38% of the residents of the Donetsk region perceive their rights to be constantly violated by the authorities. Corruption at the borders and in offices flourishes. Travel and communications are impeded. For instance, in the absence of any air connection, Mariupol is connected to Kyiv by just one road and two trains, which take at least 17 hours.

The lack of reforms and persistent corruption affect people's attitudes. Society is becoming more passive and blames Ukraine's government and the President, not Russia, for the country's hurdles. People see the political elites as the main benefactors of the Donbas conflict.

As a result, in 2017, civic engagement and the readiness to persevere for the sake of 'living anew' recorded a steady decline.

If in 2015–2016, the war in Donbas was cited as Ukraine’s main problem, it was surpassed in December 2017 by socio-economic challenges and corruption. In December 2017, according to an IRI poll, only 26% of respondents considered the war in Donbas as their main concern, while for 69% the main problem is the rising prices. Solidarity with displaced persons has waned. The Minsk agreements remain unpopular in Ukraine, yet people turn more readily to compromises and support the ‘normalization of life’ in Donbas.

Creeping indifference towards Donbas in Ukraine finds an interesting sounding board in Russia, where polls show that public interest towards the war in Donbas and the events in Ukraine has also been on the wane. As early as August 2015, the proportion of those who were interested in the political developments in Ukraine and Donbas, and of those who were not, were approximately 50–50 in Levada polls. By November 2016, the proportion of the uninterested had reached almost 70%, that is, the level before February 2014. In September 2017, it remained the same (68%). The decrease in public interest towards Donbas and Ukraine correlates with the decrease in television coverage of these issues in Russia.

The Kremlin’s efforts to overlook the “Ukraine factor” in domestic politics are seen in the popular opinion concerning the so-called pro-Russian people’s republics as well. In October 2017, 41% of Russians considered that Russia should support these republics, while 37% were of the opinion that Russia should adopt a neutral position. While it seems that the Kremlin does not want to build its domestic support around Donbas, it has not shown any signs of contributing to the fulfillment of the Minsk agreement either.

Approximately one million refugees from Donbas to Russia have become a symbol of the Kremlin’s changed preferences on the domestic front. Whereas in summer 2014 the official media encouraged Russians to accommodate their Slavic brothers, by 2017 refugees had become unwelcome and were administratively coerced to return. Moreover, those Russians who engaged in helping refugees are now facing a variety of administrative difficulties.

An even colder attitude has been witnessed towards the so-called “Russian spring” fighters who went to Donbas to establish “Novorossia”. They officially do not exist and any public efforts to make their role visible have been suppressed.

Along with the waning public interest in the topic, activists around the “Russian spring” have actively begun to accuse each other of betrayal and embezzlement. Far from becoming Russia’s neo-imperial dream or a nationalist ethno-Russian enclave, the territory has reportedly become a dark haven for a shadow economy whose leaders and authorities strengthen their position with corrupt and criminal rent-seeking.

Both Moscow and Kyiv have become helpless over Donbas. On the one hand, Moscow is wary of the new sanctions from the West as well as the uncertainty of public reactions to the Kremlin’s possible further counter-sanctions. On the other hand, public concerns in Russia similar to those in Ukraine – socio-economic difficulties – do not provide the Kremlin with many opportunities to use Donbas politically at the moment. Quite the opposite – the acute need for Russia’s help in the separatist territories hardly evokes notable solidarity among the Russian population. In the meantime, military clashes persist and lives are lost on an almost daily basis. /