

On the way to creating the ‘Donbas people’. Identity policy in the self-proclaimed republics in east Ukraine

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Four years since the unrecognized ‘republics’ in the east of Ukraine were declared, their future remains unclear. On the one hand, Ukraine, its western partners and the leadership of the Russian Federation continue to insist that these territories be returned to Kyiv’s control on the terms of the Minsk Agreements. On the other side, the self-proclaimed leaders of these ‘republics’, while also declaring their commitment to the Minsk Agreements, have publicly rejected any possibility of reunification with the rest of Ukraine¹. As a result, the east of Ukraine remains in a condition of smouldering war.

In this situation of uncertainty, the Luhansk and Donetsk ‘people’s republics’ are continuing to make efforts to legitimize and strengthen their ‘statehood’, most notably by means of a new historical policy. Both para-states are trying to revise the assessments of historical events which have been established during the years of Ukraine’s independence. Serious efforts are being made in the area of the ‘patriotic education’ of children, both in school and during extra-curricular activities; there are new ‘state’ holidays, cults, and a large-scale campaign honouring and perpetuating the memories of the new ‘rebel’ heroes and of civilians who have died at the hands of the Kyiv ‘murderers’ is being conducted.

Moreover the events of the war of 1941–5 are being reinterpreted, compared to the current military actions ‘against the fascists’. The new ‘state’ cult is being built on just such a parallel, which not only imparts significance to the current events, but also helps to contrast the ‘republics’ to today’s Ukraine. The intended effect of the DPR and LPR’s historical policies is the creation of a new Donbas community which is hostile towards ‘nationalist’ Ukraine.

A short history of ‘the *donetskiye*’

In their centralized propaganda, the ‘republics’ are trying to partly change the local identity which developed over the years of Ukrainian independence on the remains of the Soviet self-perception, as well as on new economic, political and cultural realities. The local oligarch Rinat Akhmetov and the administrative elite de-

pendent on him predominated in this period. Most of these people left the region in 2014, and have therefore been declared traitors to the Donbas.

In the Soviet period, more or less until the economic stagnation of Brezhnev’s rule, the Donbas was considered as especially important industrial region, which was reflected in the identity of the local people. In this period the

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importance of the region began to fall, and during the 1980s the tendencies towards crises and the threat of losing its privileged status led to mass strikes by the miners.

One of the reasons for the local population's support of Ukrainian independence was their aspiration to keep the Donbas dominant in the economy, and thus in the politics of the country as a whole. However, along with independence Ukraine fell into a deep economic crisis, which hit hardest at the outdated industry and at the workers themselves, who had become accustomed to high salaries and privileges.

In addition, a new national ideology began to dominate in Ukraine, wherein the 'proletarian' Donbas, Russian-speaking and rooted in Soviet culture, could have only a marginal position.

This is why, although the miners' demands during the spring 1991 strikes included state sovereignty for Ukraine, demands for 'federalization' and the granting of official status for the Russian language appeared during the 1993 strike. The local elites tried to take advantage of the situation as they tried to get some economic concessions from Kyiv. The showdown came to a head when the Donetsk region refused to transfer its share of contributions to the central budget, calling it a 'part of Kyiv's debt' to the region. As a concession to the protestors – and continuing their blackmail of Kyiv – in 1994 the leaders of the region agreed, simultaneously with the parliamentary elections, to hold a 'consultative referendum' on the federalization of Ukraine and the status of the Russian language. The vast majority of residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions supported the federal structure and the use of Russian as a second state language.

At the same time, the redistribution of former state assets started in the country, accompanied by clashes between the mafia clans, which had begun in the late 1980s. One of the largest clans was created in the Donetsk region. It began to fight not only for industrial assets, but also for political power, initially within the

region and then throughout the country. Only influence in Kyiv could guarantee the security of their business, which the laws formally in force at that time did not ensure. As the result of this battle, the Donetsk clan obtained complete control over the region. Not trusting Kyiv and struggling to find a place in the new country, the population of Donbas fell in behind the local leaders, who started to be referred to as '*donetskiye*' throughout Ukraine, a term with a very negative meaning.

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Donbas became increasingly isolated from the rest of the country politically, economically, and culturally. Although teaching in schools was coordinated by the center – in this respect, Donetsk differed little from Lviv – except for domination of Russian language at local schools, the media's propaganda fell on fertile soil and proved more effective. This is well illustrated by results of the research conducted by sociologists from Lviv and the Donbas in 2004; most of these areas residents gained their knowledge of Ukraine's history from media, primarily from television (74%), whereas only a third of residents in both areas learned from school programs.

Surveys conducted in 1994, 1999 and 2004 demonstrated also that whereas among the residents of Lviv 'Ukrainian' and 'person from Lviv (львів'янин)' were the most popular identities, in Donetsk a regional identity prevailed: over 55% in 1994 and over 68% in 2004 referred to themselves first of all as 'person from Donetsk (дончане)'. In 1994 40% of those surveyed referred to themselves as 'a Soviet person (советский человек)', whereas even in 2004,

declarations of Ukrainian identity in Donetsk barely exceeded 40 percent¹.

By 2004, when regular presidential elections were scheduled, Donbas already had the image in Ukraine of the 'criminal capital' and a region of 'Soviet people' or pro-Russian Ukrainophobes. A survey conducted in 2004 among residents of Donbas and Galicia showed that Lugansk residents saw Galicia, and Lviv residents saw the Donbas as 'an aggressive region which tries to impose its rules on the whole country'. At the same time, both saw themselves as places 'whose development should become a model for the whole of Ukraine' and which 'must defend its specificity and its right to live according to its own principles'².

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These regional differences made it easy to apply political technology, as was tested as early as 1999, when Leonid Kuchma won his second presidential term by winning enormous support in the west of Ukraine because his competitor was Petro Symonenko, a Communist who was popular in the east³. In the 2004 election, the major candidates campaign headquarters began to exploit the mutual fears of inhabitants of the west and east of the country, the latter's political center being Donetsk, which at that time was the 'capital' of Russian-speaking Ukraine. While the conventionally-understood

western Ukraine was being frightened by the notion that 'bandits' and 'puppets of Moscow' were striving for power in Kyiv, the Donbas continued to be alienated by stories of aggressive Ukrainian 'fascists' and their attempts to humiliate the region's inhabitants of by replacing their heroes with strangers, and imposing a 'wrong' version of history and 'rural' Ukrainian language and culture⁴. These stereotypes played a major role in Donbas at the beginning of 2014, when the military operation Kyiv had to initiate aided Russian television by confirming its vision of 'aggressive Ukrainian nationalists'.

Old memorials – new heroes

In this way, the ideological work of the self-proclaimed republics' leaderships had already been made easier by their predecessors, and by Ukrainian politicians and intellectuals: by 2014 the Donbas's regional identity had to a great extent been grounded on the political strife with the rest of Ukraine.

At the same time, matters were complicated because the center of this identity was based not only on Soviet myths and memory about the former Soviet glory, but also on an identification with the regional political and economic elite, the 'mafia', the main embodiment of which was the oligarch Rinat Akhmetov. After the *de facto* authorities of the Donetsk 'republic' finally stopped the work of his foundation for humanitarian assistance to the region's inhabitants and all his enterprises were 'transferred to external management', a campaign to discredit Akhmetov began in the self-proclaimed para-states. This was especially noticeable in the Luhansk 'republic', where living

¹ V. Sereda, *Regional Historical Identities and Memory* http://uamoderna.com/images/archiv/12_2/8_UM_12_2_Statti_Sereda.pdf; Н. Черниш, О. Маланчук, *Динаміка ідентичностей мешканців Львова і Донецька: компаративний аналіз (1994-2004 рр.)*, http://uamoderna.com/images/archiv/12_2/5_UM_12_2_Statti_Chernysh_Malanchuk.pdf

² http://uamoderna.com/images/archiv/12_2/3_UM_12_2_Forum.pdf

³ <http://www.cvk.gov.ua/pls/vp1999/WEBPROC0>

⁴ A typical example of this kind of article is *Features of early fascism: disturbing parallels between 1930s Germany and Ukraine 2004*, published several days before the 'third round' of the presidential elections; see А. Аненков, *Особенности раннего фашизма, тревожные параллели Германии 30-х и Украины-2004*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050219085228/http://zadonbass.org:80/first/message.html?id=8360>

standards had always been much lower than in the Donetsk region, and where the welfare of a considerable part of the locals depended completely on the Donetsk oligarch's enterprises⁵. Today the authorities of the Donetsk and Luhansk 'people's republics' are trying to introduce new heroes in place of the 'Donetsk mafia'. Donetsk has succeeded in this task to a much greater degree than Luhansk. This can be explained by the specifics of the relations between the self-appointed leaders and warlords in both 'republics'. Almost all the active and relatively popular participants of the so-called 'Russian spring' of 2014 have one way or another gradually been excluded from public positions and participation in local politics. However, whereas in Donetsk they were either sent into exile to Russia or condemned to oblivion, being barred from appearance in almost totally 'state'-run media, in Luhansk such people, including the influential warlord Aleksei Mozgovoy and the 'prime minister' Gennady Tsytkalov, have been assassinated.

Two notorious murders of locally respected militia commanders, Arsen Pavlov a.k.a. 'Motorola' and Mikhail Tolstykh a.k.a. 'Givi', also took place in Donetsk. As in the case of Mozgovoy, the deaths of Pavlov and Tolstykh were presented to the public as having been carried out by 'Ukrainian saboteurs'. But, in contrast to the *de facto* head of the Luhansk 'republic' of that time, Igor Plotnitsky, the Donetsk leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko incorporated Pavlov and Tolstykh into the 'republican' pantheon which is currently being created, commemorating their armed feats, issuing stamps and creating museum exhibits devoted to them. In 2017, as part of the annual 'Immortal Regiment' event held on the Victory Day of 9 May, when participants marching in columns carry portraits of their grand-

fathers and great-grandfathers who fought in World War II, Zakharchenko participated while carrying a photograph of Arsen Pavlov.

Since 2014, the main platform upon which the historical policy of the self-proclaimed elite of Donetsk and Luhansk 'republics' has been created is 'the 'Great Patriotic War' – the current armed conflict. The confrontation with official Kyiv (where political power, as has been declared, has been seized by 'fascists' with backing from the West), is broadly compared to the war of the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany.

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For example, both in 1943 and in 2014 the heaviest fighting in Donbas took place in the area of Savur-Mohyla, a strategic hill near the Russian-Ukrainian border, which is currently outside Kyiv's control. The WWII monument on Savur-Mohyla, which was built in the Soviet period, was severely damaged in combat in 2014. The construction of a new monument and the organisation of commemorative events in its territory became part of the historical policy of the self-proclaimed Donetsk republic's authorities.

The self-proclaimed Luhansk republic, in turn, has begun to build up 'state' cults around places and dates related to the Young Guard, the underground youth organization of the World War II period, whose existence is historically disputable but was raised to the level of a myth during the Soviet period. For example, in March 2018 three schools in the Luhansk 'republic' were named after members of the Young Guard.

In Donetsk and Luhansk attempts have also begun to use the pre-Soviet and early Soviet

⁵ At the beginning of 2017, following the blockade of Ukraine's 'republics', Akhmetov's enterprises on territories not controlled by Kyiv were *de facto* nationalized. At the same time, the local media criticized Akhmetov, accusing him of "betrayal" and "robbing" Donbass, as well as of supporting Kyiv's "anti-terrorist operation". See <http://lug-info.com/search/r/q/ахметов?page=1>

history of these territories for historical legitimation. In 2018, when Ukraine is commemorating the centenary of its independence, Donetsk proclaimed the 'year of history'. In February 2018 a cycle of ceremonies took place in the DPR dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the proclamation by local Bolshevik leaders of the 'Donetsk-Krivoy Rog republic' – which never really existed.

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New 'state' holidays are also appearing. For example, at the end of February the Luhansk and Donetsk 'republics' widely celebrated the third anniversary of the end of the 'Debaltsevo-Chernukhino operation', when the Ukrainian Armed forces were routed in the so-called 'Debaltsevo cauldron'⁶. These holidays were not only an expression of the historical policy of the 'republics' leaderships, but also demonstrated the improvement in relations between them after the change of nominal government in Luhansk, in connection with the escape to Russia of the latter 'republic's' former leader Igor Plotnitsky, who had had serious disputes with Aleksandr Zakharchenko.

The holidays celebrated in the self-proclaimed republics set these territories against Ukraine, whether this entails the newly-created commemorations related to the war against Kyiv and the 'foundation of statehood', or the old Soviet celebrations such as Victory Day or Defenders of the Fatherland Day, which the Ukrain-

⁶ Since Plotnitsky's overthrow, a rapprochement between the 'republics' has begun. This was most noticeably on display in the joint celebration of the victory in the 'Debaltsevo-Chernuchino operation', which according to the 'official' version was a joint military action by the two 'republics', though actually the key part in it was played by regular Russian forces.

ian state is breaking away from by conducting a comprehensive process of 'de-Communization'.

Educating the new 'citizens'

During four years of war, a generation which does not remember life before 2014 and has no personal experience of life in Ukraine has begun to grow in the self-proclaimed republics in the Donbas. In 2015 new school programmes and textbooks began to appear in Luhansk and Donetsk, which the *de facto* authorities of the territories in the east of Ukraine outside Kyiv's control intend to use in order to raise the new generation as exemplary 'citizens'. In 2015 so-called 'lessons of civic consciousness' were introduced in the Donetsk 'republic', starting from kindergarten. During these lessons, children are supposed to be taught within three modules: 'The Donbas is my native land', 'Develop yourself as a citizen of the Donetsk people's republic' and 'The Donbas and the Russian world'. The same lessons continue at school, from the first to the eleventh grade. Apart from these, the 'History of the Fatherland', which has replaced the history of Ukraine, has been introduced into the school curriculum. Within this course children should study two subjects, the 'History of Russia' and the 'History of the Donetsk Region', with the latter taking priority. In these subjects, the history of Ukraine is introduced only in the context of the history of Kievan Rus (which is called Ancient Rus in 'republican' textbooks⁷), the Russian Empire and the history of the USSR. Only the penultimate chapter of the History of the Donetsk Region for high school seniors, covering the period 1991–2013, refers to the Donbas as a part of Ukraine. This means that the Donbas is treated almost exclusively as a part of the Russian state.

However, the existing local textbooks and school curriculums contain many contradictions.

⁷ The name Kievan Rus, which was first used during the period of the Russian Empire, was replaced in Russia after 2014 by the name Ancient Rus or the Old Russian State.

Most importantly, there is no complete picture of whether today's Luhansk and Donetsk 'republics' are states or, if not, what their administrative and territorial status really is.

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So, in the Donetsk 'republic's' schools, the region is studied as part of courses concerning geographical matters, and in the curriculums and textbooks of these courses the Donbas is merely called an 'area' (край). At the same time, however, the textbooks are equipped with all the 'state' symbols of the self-proclaimed republic, and the date of its declaration is included on the list of 'public holidays'. The most controversial of all these subjects, perhaps, is economic geography for the 9th grade. Because all economic indicators in Donetsk are classified, the latest data in the textbook comes from 2013, and discusses the Donetsk region as a part of Ukraine, even though the textbook was published in 2016. The recommended to schools workbook for a practical exercises on 'economic and social geography of the native land' is based on the same data.

Luhansk has effectively avoided any contradictions of this kind by not including 'area studies' into the school curriculum and by using mostly Russian textbooks. The 'History of the Fatherland' is understood there as 'part of world history' and is interpreted as the history of the territory of Donbas, and specifically the Luhansk region. Textbooks on Russian history are only 'additional literature' for this course, as is emphasized in the curriculum. In practice, both the history of Russia and the history of Ukraine are studied within this course. The course of 'Histo-

ry of the Fatherland' in the Donetsk 'republic' contains no Ukrainian sources in its list of recommended literature. However, in Luhansk the course also includes books and articles, published in Ukraine (in Ukrainian as well), including a translation of *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas*, a well-known work by the American researcher Hiroaki Kuromiya.

Where Donetsk has 'lessons of civic consciousness', Luhansk offers extracurricular activities entitled 'Program of spiritual and moral education for schoolchildren and students of the Luhansk people's republic', which lays emphasis on the holidays and traditions of the Orthodox church. In elementary school grades, children are also taught 'the Basics of Orthodox culture'. Because local textbooks for the majority of school subjects in the 'republics' have not yet been published, the quality and content of teaching in each specific subject depends to a great degree on the teacher and the school administrations.

The 'Donbas people'

In the course of the war years, a peculiar system of concepts related to the conflict has begun to develop in the breakaway territories of the Ukrainian east. Soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine are often called 'occupiers', the government-held part of Donbas is 'territories temporarily under Ukrainian control', its inhabitants are 'compatriots', and the declared future accession of this territory to the 'republics' is 'reunification'. Besides, there is the expression 'the Donbas people', which took root in local usage when the so-called 'Humanitarian program for the reunification of the Donbas people' was launched in both the Donetsk and Luhansk 'republics'. The stated goal of this program is to provide help to the residents of those parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions under Ukrainian governmental control, who are allegedly suffering under Kyiv's rule, from payments to veterans of the Great Patriotic War, to medical care and education at the local universities.

For now, it is still difficult to define with full confidence what specifically the expression 'the Donbas people' is understood to mean. Does it mean the population of the region, or are the heads of these self-proclaimed states thinking of the existence of a separate Donbas nation?

It can may be expected that the unconventional gas issue will give rise to tension on the in Ukrainian political scene politics more than once, especially when the next elections are scheduled.

It is unclear, for example, what in their minds distinguishes the Donbas's residents from 'Russians' in other Ukrainian regions, which the ideologists of the 'Russian spring' included into the so-called *Novorossiya* in 2014. On the one hand, even during the signing of the Minsk agreements, the 'republican' authorities insisted on expanding their control onto the whole territory of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. On the other hand, the fact of the existence of two Donbas 'republics' makes the claims of their nominal administrations to 'reunify' the 'Donbas people' in the pre-war borders of the two regions seem foolish. Moreover, while in the education system of Luhansk 'Homeland' refers specifically to Lugansk, in Donetsk the same term refers to Russia, while education about Donetsk forms part of the area studies (краеведение) module. This means that there is no consensus on their definition or identity even between the 'republics' themselves. The series of scandalous individual initiatives such as the creation of the state of 'Malorossiya'⁸,

⁸ In July 2017 representatives of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics, as well as 19 regions of Ukraine, announced in Donetsk the creation of a state called 'Malorossiya'; it was declared that Ukraine was a failed state, and that a new entity should arise in its place. See <https://dan-news.info/politics/predstaviteli-dnr-lnr-i-regionov-ukrainy-obyavili-v-donecke-o-sozdanii-gosudarstva-malorossiya.html>

attempts to introduce the name of 'Donbasites' for the locals⁹, or to teach a 'Donetsk regional dialect'¹⁰ to the inhabitants, just underlines this ideological chaos.

Another example of such absurdity is the celebration in Donetsk of the anniversary of the *Pereyaslavska Rada* in 1654, which is portrayed as 'the unification of Ukraine and Russia'. At the same time, Donbas is seen exclusively as a part of Russia and any affiliation it may have had to Ukraine – especially during the period of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, when the region was almost uninhabited – is completely denied. These last controversies are only partially mitigated in three marginal versions of Ukrainian history, in which Ukraine and the Ukrainian people are something artificial, an 'invention' of the Austrians or Poles as 'revenge' against Russia. However, these versions do not appear in the 'official' rhetoric or in the approved school programs and textbooks.

Conclusions

The uncertain status of the self-proclaimed republics in the east of Ukraine and the nature of their internal politics prevent them from creating a balanced and consistent ideology, as is clearly shown in the existing school curriculums, in the rhetoric, and in the holidays they celebrate. The lack of any agreement to deploy a UN peacekeeping force in the Donbas between the West and Ukraine on the one hand and Russia on the other offers no hope for a quick resolution to the conflict. That is why this region is likely to remain in a state of drifting armed conflict in the coming years. In this situation, the DPR and LPR will certainly continue to work on the creation of the 'Donbas

⁹ <http://lug-info.com/comments/one/io-rekto-ra-lnau-mikhail-oreshkin-sravniyat-uroven-nashego-vuz-a-i-ego-ukrainskogo-dvoinika-nekorrektno-542>

¹⁰ <https://dan-news.info/culture-ru/prepodavатели-и-студенты-вузов-dnr-nachali-izuchenie-doneckogo-dialekta-v-planax-sozdanie-slovarya.html>

people' as a kind of community opposing the rest of Ukraine, in which populists from the western and central parts of the country may come to power in 2019.

Russia does not exert a direct influence on the identity policy of the 'republics' *per se*, although Moscow supports them financially, in particular by funding special programs such as the 'Humanitarian program for reunification of the Donbas people' and projects like the research into the 'Donetsk regional dialect'. Russian tel-

evision also continues to play an essential role in the region.

The more difficult the economic situation in the 'republics' becomes, and the greater the fatigue and disappointment of local population under such conditions, the more active and aggressive the local propaganda will become. It is obvious that the longer the conflict continues, the more difficult it will be for Kyiv to reintegrate the population of the breakaway territories when it ends.

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