

Heading Towards a Big Union State: Why Does Russia Really Need Donetsk and Luhansk

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The Russian project of the *Big Union State* directly affects the fate of the territories of eastern Ukraine occupied by Russia. What goals is Russia actually pursuing in speaking about the *integration of Donetsk and Luhansk*? Russia's motives lie in the plane of both domestic and foreign policy.

The Bureaucracy of the Big Union State

The project of the *Big Union State* is a priority for Russia, and all resignations, appointments, and manipulations in negotiation formats in which the Russian Federation is involved, must be considered from this point of view. After the resignation of Vladislav Surkov, Vladimir Putin's ex-aide, all activities *around the perimeter*, i.e. in Russian-occupied territories and in Belarus, were supervised by the Ministry of Economic Development and the Department for Border Cooperation of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation.

At the end of last year, Russian observers pointed out that the decree on the reorganization of the Border Cooperation Department of the Presidential Administration remained unchanged when Dmitry Kozak replaced Vladislav Surkov. However, it turned out that there were other significant changes coming by a separate presidential decree, all agencies that are directly or indirectly related to the border manipulations of the Russian Federation were united under the leadership of Kozak. The newly created Interdepartmental Commission on International Development Assistance is a unit that includes the Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation; the Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council; the deputy heads of all ministries and agencies that are somehow

involved in this *international humanitarian cooperation*.

The Russian media called this commission *Russian USAID*. But in reality, we are not talking about humanitarian aid in its pure form, and not even about soft power in the usual sense, but about an instrument for integration processes that must be implemented to achieve the Russian goal of surrounding itself not with individual states, but with a single, faceless near abroad with its own history, ideology, and development strategy. However, even with such a complex and multi-stage structure, in the absence of a person capable of developing an ideology, this project is doomed. After Surkov left government service, the position of borderland ideologue was left unfilled. The latest Russian activities in the separatist Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) demonstrate this clearly.

The Russian Donbass Doctrine: An Imitation of Humanitarian Support in the Separatist Republics

What does Russia offer in practice to implement its project of the *Big Union State*? Its main tool remains an imitation of support for the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine. Residents of separatist states in eastern Ukraine are offered not Russian social benefits or guarantees (which are not provided for residents of the occupied territories who hold illegally issued Russian passports), but the promise of integration into a common space with Russia in the future and new humanitarian projects.

At the beginning of 2021, the *Russian Donbass Doctrine* was presented in Donetsk. It was a forty-page document, sometimes word for word duplicating the contents of emails from the hacked account of Boris Rapoport, who was the Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Department for Social and Economic Cooperation with the CIS Countries, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia (now – the Department for Border Cooperation of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation) in

2014. Old projects like *Novorossia* were also included in the doctrine. According to the doctrine, Novorossia consists of the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, where pro-Russian politicians would organize a semblance of popular discontent with the humanitarian and cultural policies of the Ukrainian government. At the same time, separatist DPR and LPR remain separate entities, which, nevertheless, are moving in one direction – towards integration into the Russian Federation.

The doctrine indicates that the borders of the separatist DPR and LPR coincide with the borders of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, duplicating the texts of the laws on the borders of the separatist states themselves adopted in 2019. Such claims made by the separatist republics are definitely contrary to the Minsk Agreements, but the doctrine does not see any contradiction here, and even mentions the Minsk Agreements. From its point of view, this set of documents is needed only in order to legitimize the separatist DPR and LPR as parties to the negotiations. In fact, this reference to the Minsk Agreements is an attempt to once again declare the intention of the Russian Federation in the Trilateral Contact Group to present the representatives of the separatist republics as full-fledged participants, contradicting the very essence of the negotiation format, which is called trilateral because the parties to it are Ukraine and Russia with the OSCE as a mediator.

Presenting the doctrine, the heads of the separatist republics stated that they intend to *support Russian and the Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine* by expanding the activities of the *Humanitarian Program for the Reunification of the People of Donbass* in the territory of Ukraine. By expanding the activities of this humanitarian program (which has existed since 2017 and originally concerned only residents of the government-controlled territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions) to support *all Russian-speaking people of Ukraine*, Russia is pursuing its old goal – to recognize these entities and provoke another scandal within Ukrainian society, this

time around language issues.

The *Humanitarian Program* offers a fairly simple tool for such manipulation: a one-time financial payment, to World War II veterans and other socially unprotected persons, to help *victims of language discrimination*, but only those of them who *went to court to protect their rights and freedoms*. It is not so much the hypothetical payment that is important, but rather that the Russian Federation's assertions that Russian-speakers are discriminated against in Ukraine are confirmed by appeals to the courts as well as data provided by the separatist republics.

And here it does not matter at all that according to the data of the separatist republics themselves, only 76,000 people have taken advantage of the opportunities afforded by the *Humanitarian Program* for all the years of its existence. It is only important to create the opportunity for another political statement, and for *calls to negotiate directly with representatives of the separatist republics, who, moreover, protect Russian-speaking Ukrainians*. Presenting the Russian-Ukrainian war as an interethnic conflict is an old technique, which the separatist republics never fail to implement. Due to the obvious crisis of ideas in the Russian Presidential Administration, this project has been taken up with renewed vigor.

So what are all these documents and doctrines really for? Russia is pursuing several goals at once. The most obvious is propaganda. However, as is obvious from the above, it is a very low-quality propaganda employing old techniques that did not work in 2014-2015. Another goal is directly related to the negotiations on a settlement: Russia is trying to gain recognition for the separatist states, and to present them as parties to the conflict instead of Russia itself.

Elections to the State Duma and Illegal Armed Groups

However, the presentation of doctrines and new promises to the

residents of the separatist republics have another dimension, essential for Russian domestic politics. It is important for the Russian ruling party to gain electoral points for the elections to the State Duma, which will take place this autumn. After all, Russia plans for those residents of the occupied territories who have already received Russian passports to vote in the elections. That is why, in parallel with the propaganda measures, Russia, as the occupying side, issued passports to the residents of the separatist DPR and LPR. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, more than half a million residents of the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine have already received Russian passports^[1], and Russia plans to double this figure by the end of 2021.^[2] Hence Russian ruling party gets a kind of jackpot: after all, with the issuance of passports in Donetsk and Luhansk, it is possible to exaggerate the number of votes, especially those cast for the ruling party *United Russia*.

United Russia made every possible effort to ensure that it received these votes. As became known recently, the Secretary of the General Council of *United Russia*, Andrei Turchak, and the formal head of the *Union of Donbass Volunteers*, Alexander Boroday (he previously held the post of prime minister of the separatist DPR) signed a cooperation agreement. *The Union of Donbass Volunteers* is a significant group of people (according to Boroday, over 14,000)^[3] who fought in the war in Donbass and other conflicts in which the Russian Federation took part. There are other political projects related to the Russian-occupied Donbass – for example, the alliance of the party *A Just Russia* with the party of Zakhar Prilepin (a writer who was for some time in the ranks of the illegal armed groups of the separatist republics) *Za Pravdu*.

It is obvious that the Russian-occupied Donbass has managed to become not only a matter of Russian foreign policy, but also a factor in domestic policy. This is important to take into account when assessing the current Duma election campaign. In

addition to the votes from residents of the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine, there is also an attempt to gauge the sentiments both among the part of the electorate that supports modern Russian militarism and aggression towards neighboring states, and among those people who have been fighting in eastern Ukraine from the Russian Federation. Russia needs to understand to what extent these groups of the population support the existing government and believe that its policies reflect their views, and how much they are generally integrated into society. Thus, we see that using the project of the *Big Union State* and the elections to the State Duma, Russia is trying to achieve several goals, which can be divided into three groups. The first is domestic goals, which are:

1. to receive the required number of *correct* votes, which will strengthen the position of the ruling party *United Russia*;
2. to gauge the level of support from their citizens who fought in the war in eastern Ukraine, and create the illusion of their importance.

The second group is international goals, related to existing negotiation formats on conflict settlement:

1. to gain recognition for the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk, thereby masking Russia's own role in the conflict. Russia is trying to change its own status regarding the conflict from an aggressor to a mediator once again;
2. to create an additional range of challenges for the Ukrainian side within the existing negotiation formats, i.e. raising the issue of recognition of Russian passports for the residents of the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine by the Ukrainian side.

The third group is goals related to occupied territories themselves:

1. to partially extinguish the dissatisfaction with the uncertainty that is felt today by the residents of the

occupied territories of eastern Ukraine – they have not returned to Ukraine even though Russia has rejected them, because Russia does not want to repeat the *Crimean scenario* with the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk;

2. to distract the population of the occupied territories from the fact that Russia is not coping with its obligations as an occupying party. Instead of increasing social payments (for example, to the level of Russian ones, as it would be expected for Russian passport holders), Russia encourages residents of the occupied territories to resolve their problems through the upcoming elections, without spending any additional funds (for example, to repair the infrastructure destroyed by Russia, raise social standards or the level of medical care, etc.);

In other words, the project of the *Big Union State* does not bring anything positive either for the people or for the territories that Russia intends to include in it. Moreover, the states bordering the Russian Federation should seriously think about how they intend to defend their sovereignty in the coming years. After all, people's lives – and their quality of life – are at stake. Residents of the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine can confirm this.

[1]

<https://glavcom.ua/ru/news/zhiteley-okkupirovannogo-donbassa-hotyat-zastavit-golosovat-na-vyborah-v-gosdumu-rossii-755468.html>

[2]

<https://glavcom.ua/country/incidents/u-derzhdumi-prognozujut-masove-zrostannja-kilkosti-zhiteliv-donbasu-z-pasportami-rosiji-752110.html>

[3]

<https://tass.ru/obschestvo/7349463>