

Evaluation

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Ukraine:

Differences Between Donetsk, Luhansk, People's Republics could cause divisions

December 1, 2021

Key Judgements

While externally the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics present a unified front, dividing factors suggest the possibility of future political divisions between the groups. The two major Ukrainian separatist movements, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (respectively the DPR and LPR) are frequently grouped together.

The D/LPR are united through:

- A joint military, the United Armed Forces of Novorossiia, which deters Ukraine from seizing the Republics' territories.
- Formal integration in Russian immigration, economics, and politics.

However, they are divided through:

- Break-away events such as Novorossiia, in which the DPR and LPR declined joint status, and Malorossiia, where the LPR diverted away from the DPR.
- Several differences in public opinions. LPR citizens are less anti-Western, more willing to negotiate, and more willing to compromise compared to those in the DPR.
- Differences in leaders' end goals. The head of the LPR wants an autonomous state; however, the head of the DPR wants to join Russia.
- Key differences in administrative behavior, showcasing division as the LPR pursues a more liberal domestic policy than the DPR.

These factors make it problematic to constantly refer to the republics as though they are identical. Further research should continue to analyze differences between the separatist movements and explore Western geopolitical strategies that take advantage of these differences.

Introduction

In 2014, the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics declared independence from Ukraine and have since exerted significant control over the Donbas region despite Ukrainian efforts to gain control through force. The Ukrainian government and Western nations have condemned the separatists’ activities and do not recognize their legitimacy. However, conflict is ongoing, negotiations are unlikely, and neither side is poised to make significant gains. The Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics are not the same, yet many in government and academia group them together as one. While their military cooperation and joint relations with Russia present the Republics as a united front, past events, public opinion, distinct end goals, and differences in administration highlights their independence. While this analysis highlights known differences, further research and investigation into each republic would augment this analysis. Additionally, this analysis assumes Russia does not fully control the D/LPR.

Background

Semantic distinctions between the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics are important to understand existing literature. The Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics will be abbreviated as DPR, LPR, and when together, D/LPR. Others refer to them as LNR and DNR, as the Russian is Луганская Нарóдная Респуб́лика and Донецкая Народная Республика (pronounced *Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika* and *Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika*). Additionally, ‘Luhansk’ is also spelled ‘Lugansk’. These differences are semantic and do not change the regions discussed. The D/LPR are named from their oblasts in the Donbas/Donbass regions of Ukraine.

Following pro-western protests against the Ukrainian government in 2014, multiple militia groups arose in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. These militia groups were absorbed into the DPR and LPR. To resolve the conflict, in 2014 and 2015, Russia, Ukraine, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) met with the support of France and Germany (known as the Normandy Four) to develop the Minsk-1 and Minsk-2 accords. These accords called for, among other things:

- Restoration of Ukrainian control
- Special status of Donetsk and Luhansk
- Local elections
- Ceasefire and disarmament
- Dialogs and amnesty

However, the Minsk accords have not been fully implemented and the conflict remains ongoing.¹ Currently, Dennis Pushilin and Leonid Pasechnik are the heads of the DPR and LPR respectively.

¹ Cory Welt, “Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy,” *Congressional Research Service*, September 19, 2019.

Analysis

While uniting factors such as a joint military and the D/LDR's formal relations with Russia unite the oblasts in an official capacity, dividing factors, including past events, differences in public opinion, separate end goals, and administrative differences suggest internal divisions exist.

Uniting & Dividing Factors for the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics	
Uniting Factors	Dividing Factors
Joint Military between the D/LPR	The events of Novorossiya and Malorossiya
D/LDR's Formal Relations with Russia	Public Opinion in the Oblasts
	End Goals of the D/LDR's Leaders
	Administration of the Oblasts

A united military and similar relations with Russia indicate the leadership of the DPR and LPR present a unified front to external bodies. In 2014, militias in the DPR and LPR joined to create the United Armed Forces of Novorossiya and are officially controlled by the leadership of the LPR and DPR.² Some argue this joint army is controlled by Moscow.³

Additionally, both the DPR and LPR receive economic and cultural support from Russia. The DPR and LPR have signed a joint trade deal with Russia.⁴ Citizens in both oblasts receive passports from Russia and voted in Russian duma elections.⁵ This showcases the unity between the two oblasts at an official level.

https://judiciary.house.gov/uploadedfiles/report_crs_ukraine__background_conflict_with_russia_and_u.s._policy_september_19_2019.pdf

² Interfax, "East Ukrainian Militias Form Novorossiya Army." *Interfax: Russia & CIS Military Newswire*, September 17, 2014.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=n5h&AN=98325276&site=eds-live>.

³ Crisis Group, "Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine," *Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°79 Kyiv/Brussels*, 5 February 2016. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/56b843194.pdf>.

⁴ Christelle Néant, "Donbass," *Donbass Insider*, 9-19-2021. <https://www.donbass-insider.com/2021/09/19/donbass-dpr-and-lpr-leaders-sign-agreement-on-common-customs-zone/>

⁵ Vladimir Socor, "Russian Elections in Ukraine's Donbas: Annexing People Before Annexing Territory," *Jamestown*, 9-23-2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-elections-in-ukraines-donbas-annexing-people-before-annexing-territory/>

Despite these facts, the Novorossiia and Malorossiia events show the D/LPR as separate entities. In 2014, the D/LPR agreed to become a joint-People's Republic called Novorossiia.⁶ However, in 2015 the Novorossiia project was frozen, with leaders justifying that it didn't meet the Minsk accords.⁷ However, regardless of the justification, the end of Novorossiia prevented a fully united D/LPR. A similar idea resurfaced in 2016 when DPR leader Alexander Zakharchenko proposed the Malorossiia (small Russia) State that would succeed Ukraine. This was quickly denounced by Russia and the LPR distanced itself from the project.⁸

Differences in public opinion between people in the DPR and LPR could produce a wedge for future disagreements. In polling from 2019, 71% of surveyed people in the LPR were willing to negotiate compared to 49% of those in the DPR. 34% of those surveyed in the LPR wanted to compromise to end the conflict compared to 14% of those in the DPR. These differences may not yet be reflected politically, however; given the LPR's favorable attitudes toward negotiations, cracks in their relationship could appear.

These differences could be exacerbated by private conflicts as "official leaders in Donetsk are privately critical of their LNR counterparts, whom they accuse of corruption, and [...] failing to provide promised forces." Relations between D/LPR heads improved, but it is unclear if disagreements remain at lower levels.⁹

Semantic distinctions between D/LPR's leaders could indicate different end goals. Dennis Pushilin stated a desire to join the Russian empire.¹⁰ However, the LPR's Leonid Pasechnik desires Luhansk to become "a state within the state" with special status.¹¹ While Ukraine has been unwilling to include special status in the constitution, much less gift Russia the Donetsk region, future negotiations could stress end goal differences between the groups.¹²

⁶ Euromaidan Press, "Terrorist organizations declare New Russian "Union of People's Republics"," *Euromaidan Press*, 6-24-2014. <http://euromaidanpress.com/2014/06/24/terrorist-organizations-declare-new-russian-union-of-peoples-republics/>

⁷ Andrei Kolesnikov, "Why the Kremlin Is Shutting Down the Novorossiia Project," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 5-29-2015. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/05/29/why-kremlin-is-shutting-down-novorossiia-project/i96u>

⁸ TASS, "Malorossiia project is personal initiative of self-proclaimed republic's leader — Kremlin," *TASS*, 7-18-2017. <https://tass.com/politics/956825>

⁹ Crisis Group, "Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine," P.6-7

¹⁰ Ap With Network Writers, "Rebel leader asks to join Russia," *News.com*, 5-13-2014, <https://www.news.com.au/world/rebel-leader-denis-pushilin-declares-east-ukraine-province-sovereign-state-and-asks-to-join-russia/news-story/c8722030ca4b378680d0abe5467ec4cf>

¹¹ Denys Kazanskyi, 9-28-2019, "Donbas: The New Repertoire," *Ukrainian Week*, <https://ukrainianweek.com/Politics/235927>

¹² Christelle Néant, "Ukraine refuses to include the Donbass special status into its constitution," *Donbass Insider*, 5-18-2020. <https://www.donbass-insider.com/2020/05/18/ukraine-refuses-to-include-the-donbass-special-status-into-its-constitution/>

Variations in the administration of the D/LPR suggests in ideological differences. The LPR has a more liberal border policy, enabling transit between Ukraine and the oblast. The DPR has a stricter border policy, decreasing transit. These border policies clash with each other making it increasingly difficult to cross from one oblast to the other. Furthermore, local lawmakers in both Oblasts are introducing independent economic measures, such as customs duties, which may threaten the joint system by stifling trade.¹³

Scope

Russia and Ukraine's recent massing of troops on the Ukrainian border raises tensions.

Russia's annexation of Donbas would be extremely difficult and costly to Russia; however, if separatist movements caused significant unrest, Russia may send peacekeepers to enter the zone. Furthermore, if Ukrainian soldiers accidentally or intentionally attack Russians on the border a broader conflict could spark.¹⁴

Current information on the individual separatist movements is extremely limited.

Interviews with heads of movements are not targeted to identify differences. Russia, who may influence information flow, is disincentivized to showcase the individualistic behavior in the D/LPR. The separatist movements have other incentives to minimize public perception of dissent as divisions could be leveraged by the West and Ukraine in negotiations.

Conclusion

Dividing factors in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics suggest the possibility of wider, internal political fractures despite presentation of a unified front. Future research should highlight how divisions could impact negotiations and Russia's local agenda. This could be clarified by further investigations at the governmental and non-governmental levels into the backgrounds of key separatist leaders. Finally, future researchers on Ukrainian separatism should avoid broad generalizations of the D/LPR.

¹³ Юрий Ковальчук, "Раскол между Донецком и Луганском – что мешает республикам жить вместе?," *Ритм Евразии*, 5-14-2021. <https://www.ritm Eurasia.org/news--2021-05-14--raskol-mezhdu-doneckom-i-luganskom-chto-meshaet-respublikam-zhit-vmeste-54619>

¹⁴ David Keyton and Lorne Cook, "Offense or defense? Russia increases troops along Ukraine border.," *Christian Science Monitor*, 11-30-2021. [https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2021/1130/Offense-or-defense-Russia-increases-troops-along-Ukraine-border](https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2021/1130/Offense-or-defense-Russia-increases-troops-along-Ukraine-border;);

James Sherr Obe, "Rumours of War: Another Russian Surprise in Ukraine?," *ICDS*, March 30 2021, <https://icds.ee/en/rumours-of-war-another-russian-surprise-in-ukraine/>

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He participated in the Task Force Foxtire 2021 Winter Internship where he worked as a policy analyst and humanitarian researcher. During his time at the organization, he compiled information on the humanitarian crisis in Central America and worked closely with the policy development team. Will is a brilliant and motivated young professional who has a bright future in the international affairs community. ~ John R. Muns, Executive Director