

Under the Cover of COVID-19

REVERSE IRREDENTISM RISING IN EAST UKRAINE’S “PEOPLE’S REPUBLICS”

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 657

June 2020

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With the spread of COVID-19 to Europe, policy patterns in the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR/LNR) indicate that these “separatist entities,” which Moscow engineered in 2014 to crush Ukraine’s EU and NATO aspirations, have increasingly pushed for joining Russia. This is a case of coronavirus-facilitated reverse irredentism—when a smaller entity that is part of one state seeks to merge with a neighboring state. The military force, policies, laws, and official statements from those areas imply that Moscow will remain the principal (and stronger) driver of the ongoing Donbas war. Conflict resolution will hinge on the Kremlin’s broader geopolitical ambitions, capacities, and constraints, rather than on: 1) the popular will on either side of the frontlines, 2) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s dogged peace efforts, 3) international diplomacy, or 4) putative dialogue between Kyiv and the DNR/LNR. All the while, the broad handling of the pandemic appears to be contributing the effect of drawing the entities toward Russia.

Pandemics as Analytical Prisms

With the acute sense of existential and group threat rising, crises crystalize identity—particularly where group identities are in flux choices (as a new thirty-six-author [inter-disciplinary analysis](#) reminds us). Therefore, one would justifiably expect COVID-19 responses in contested entities such as DNR/LNR to be particularly revealing of their leaders’ preferences and the very nature of political authority.

The specific question in this context is with whom the DNR/LNR leaders prefer to form collective identity and link their fate facing COVID-19. The key options are reintegration into Ukraine, independence (separatism), or joining Russia (reverse irredentism). These options are not new, but the pandemic raised the urgency to clarify choices.

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Reintegration into Ukraine: Incentives Ignored

The pandemic, particularly toward the end of March 2020, arguably boosted two powerful incentives for the DNR/LNR reintegration into Ukraine: socioeconomic interdependence and uncertainty about Russia's state capacity.

- The dependency of the DNR/LNR residents on the rest of Ukraine came through loud and clear. Despite six years of warfighting and political hostility, the Donbas residents continued to interact extensively across the frontlines. In January 2020, there were 1,067,899 frontline crossings in the Donbas for work, pension withdrawal, medical care, family visits, business, and other [reasons](#). Over 300,000 pensioners in the non-government controlled areas (NGCA) ended up being [cut off](#) from payments. These are significant numbers relative to the DNR/LNR population size estimated at about [3.5 million](#). As Ukraine's government and the DNR/LNR restricted entry to territories under their control—suspending the late 2019 agreements to simplify [border crossings](#)—residents' in the NGCA complained about the missed connectedness.
- On March 16, 2020, following the lockdowns, Donbas SOS, an NGO assisting civilians on both sides of the conflict, saw the number of hotline calls from the DNR/LNR spike up from their monthly average of 120 to 256. Callers pleaded for help with visits for family events, chemotherapy treatments, doctor appointments, cemetery visits, and pension payments. Some callers worried they might be unable to have COVID-19 tests if they developed symptoms and noted the [shortage](#) of medical facilities in the DNR/LNR areas.
- By late April 2020, as the number of COVID-19 cases in the DNR/LNR increased, local medical workers reported being in a state of panic over the [lack](#) of facilities and resources—a considerable number of which had been destroyed or damaged from 2014 through 2017.² In NGCA's Donetsk and Makeyevka, five hospitals were put under total or partial [quarantine](#) for two weeks due to COVID-19 outbreaks among medical personnel.
- In telephone interviews throughout the NGCA conducted by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), 56 percent of 1,200 local respondents preferred to [remain](#) within Ukraine. That majority endured from 2016 to 2019 despite relentless anti-Ukraine campaigning in the NGCA. Moreover, close to half of those respondents did not insist on Kyiv granting special autonomous status to the DNR/LNR. One in three respondents in 2019 said they had crossed

² See: Erik Herron, Cynthia Buckley, Ralph Clem, "[Attacks on Healthcare Infrastructure in the Donbas: Implications for Ukrainian State Legitimacy](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 562, January 2019.

into the Ukraine government-controlled regions in the previous six months, while one in six respondents crossed over at least once a month.

- Rather than advocating compromises with Kyiv to solve those problems, [DNR](#) and [LNR](#) leaders [virulently criticized](#) the entry restrictions, intimating that Ukraine was using the pandemic to sabotage the Minsk agreements. The DNR's head, Denis Pushilin, categorically [stated](#): "We never had and never will have any prerequisites to ask Ukraine for help."

From Pseudo-Separatism to Reverse Irredentism

- Whereas insisting that their entities have distinct and separate interests that need to be internationally [recognized](#), the statelet leaders' *de facto* moved closer to Russia. A pro-Russia Donbas online news portal [proclaimed](#): "They have coronavirus, we have Russia."
- In a statement on April 7, 2020, to mark six years since the DNR proclamation, its head, Denis Pushilin, pledged "not to swerve from the road toward integration with Russia," noting: "Neither war nor other hardships can stop us from reaching the [main objective](#)." DNR authorities, for the first time, declared Russia's state holiday, the Day of Russia (June 12), as an official [holiday](#) on its territory.
- The DNR/LNR stepped up the promotion of Russian citizenship among DNR/LNR residents. On April 10, 2020, the DNR removed existing waitlist quotas, thus allowing an unlimited number of applications to be filed online anytime for DNR and [Russian citizenship](#) (DNR citizenship is a prerequisite for obtaining Russian passports). In the LNR, quarantine was enacted and borders closed, but an exception was made for DNR and LNR residents traveling to the neighboring Rostov province for Russian passports. Citing eyewitnesses, media reported several charter buses arriving weekly in late March-early April 2020 for that reason from the DNR/LNR into the nearby town of [Krasnoye Sulino](#).
- The DNR amended its constitution on March 6, 2020, declaring Russian the sole official language on its territory, with the stated goal of strengthening [ties](#) with Russia. The DNR also mandated that secondary schools on its territory transition to the Russian state [curriculum](#) starting September 1 and that mandated teachers and college instructors be [retrained](#) to Russian standards.
- Both the DNR and LNR decreed in April 2020 that their capital cities would revert to Soviet-era names in messages about the Soviet victory in World War II and any related events: [Stalino](#) and [Voroshilovgrad](#). The names commemorate the Soviet dictator and his one-time defense minister, respectively. Both statelets

rescheduled [military parades](#) to mark the World War II victory to the same day as Russia, June 24.

These moves are particularly telling of DNR/LNR intentions, as they were made when serious doubts arose about Russia's capacity and resolved to prop up its client statelets in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Brent crude oil prices—a potent indicator of Russia's economic position—dropped this year from \$70/barrel in early January 2020 to \$15/barrel in [late March](#) and \$9/barrel in [late April](#)—historic lows not seen since [late 1998](#). Those drops also signaled that prospective shifts toward telecommuting in the post-pandemic world would further curtail demand for fossil fuels, and with it, Russia's state capacity.
- Against the backdrop of Russia's large medical equipment airlifts to the United States and Italy in late March 2020, the non-dispatch of Russia's regular convoy of dozens of military trucks to help the DNR/LNR cope with COVID-19 was poignantly conspicuous; 95 such convoys brought in and took out of the DNR/LNR cargoes with unverified content including some humanitarian aid from mid-2014 through [November 2019](#). These developments imply that the political fortunes of DNR/LNR leaders could quickly become a small change in Russia's larger geopolitical strategies. And yet, the DNR/LNR leaders profusely [praised Moscow](#) for smaller-scale [assistance](#).

Notably, the DNR synced its public health systems' [responses to COVID](#) with Russia rather than with Ukraine, even though Russia experienced higher infection and mortality rates.

The Donbas War: Keeping Up Moscow's Leverage

The intensity of military confrontation in a war that has claimed close to 14,000 lives decreased below the 2019 average during the first month after COVID lockdowns on both sides, but increased again later, originating predominantly in the DNR/LNR.

- According to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) [reports](#), the number of ceasefire violations in the Donbas, including the use of firepower, decreased markedly from mid-March to mid-April 2020 (see **Figure 1**). After a spike around March 30-April 1, the number of explosions—exchanges of fire including artillery bombardments and regularly resulting in casualties—became less intense, with the weekly average dropping from 250 to about 125 by April 20, 2020 (see **Figure 2**). The number of weapons prohibited by Minsk accords near the line of control—most notably by the DNR/LNR forces--also declined (see **Figure 1**).

- Whereas SMM reports studiously avoid naming which side initiates the use of force on a given day, an analysis of locations it provides where the majority of explosions take place indicates that most bombardments and shootings come from the DNR/LNR side (**Figure 1**). Areas around the government-controlled Zolote and Stanytsa Luhanska settlements in Luhansk province were a major target of the use of firepower on 13 out of 23 days from late March through late April. Both were areas from which the Ukrainian armed forces and Russian-backed DNR/LNR forces pulled back one kilometer in late 2019. The location of explosions in the government-controlled areas, as [identified](#) by SMM, indicates they originated from the DNR/LNR or came against DNR/LNR forces pushing into government-controlled territory.
- Ceasefire violations and explosions have picked up again since late April, coming close to the 2019 levels, and in late May, the DNR staged military drills close to CGA areas. Indicative of their predominant origin, the overall level of hostilities was most closely tracked by the number of times DNR/LNR forces restricted the OSCE SMM freedom of movement (see **Figure 1**).

The DNR/LNR leaders failed to follow through on Kyiv's proposal—conveyed to the Russian government through OSCE by former Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma on March 26, 2020—to observe a full ceasefire during the pandemic. And though the DNR foreign minister [welcomed](#) the U.N. Secretary General's blanket proposal to stop fighting globally, she made no mention of the Kuchma proposal, which was issued in response to the UNSG's proposal—a striking omission.

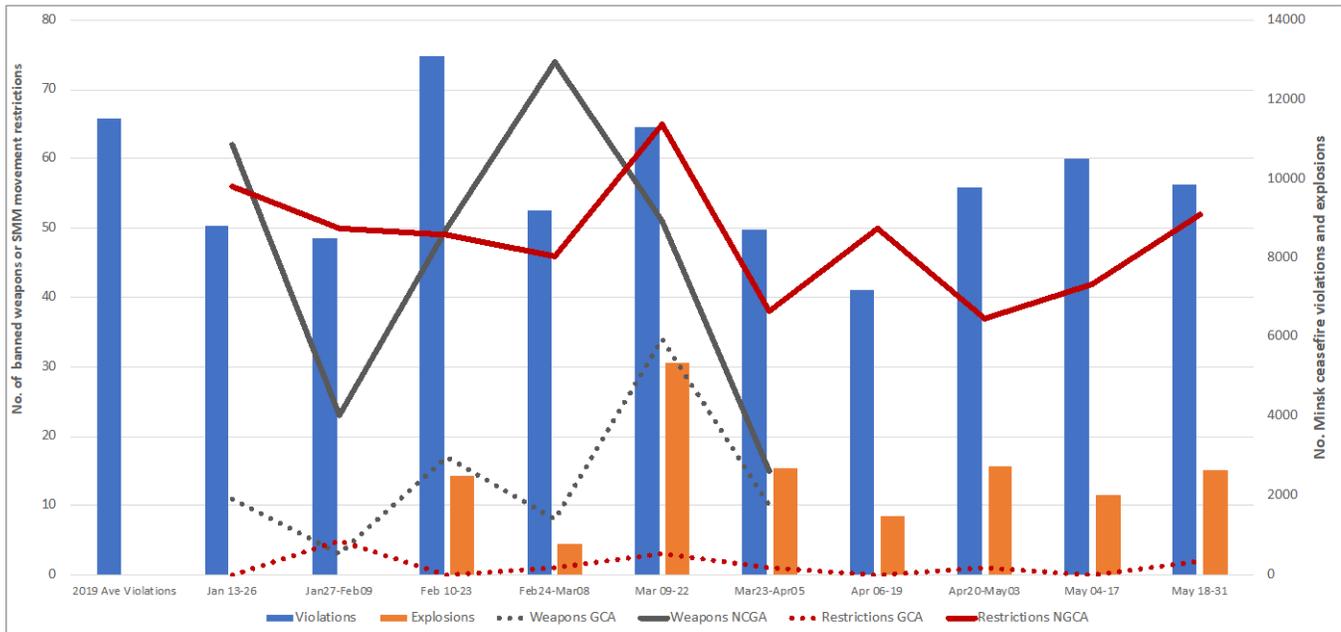
Meanwhile, DNR leaders continued to express confidence that Kyiv would eventually yield to DNR/LNR political demands. The only way for them to make such claims is to have confidence in their military superiority—something that would be unthinkable without Moscow's support and without them counting on it and courting it. The head of DNR's legislature, Volodymyr Bidiyovka, [articulated](#) this position on the DNR government website: "Ukraine simply has no choice. It will have to negotiate with Donbas and under the terms established by Donbas. Otherwise, Ukraine will simply cease to exist. The current social, humanitarian, economic and other Ukrainian crises only bring this disaster closer."

Conclusion

These developments have major implications. They call into question the viability of Ukraine president Zelensky's efforts to resolve the Donbas war through negotiations. Not only do the DNR/LNR positions remain unchanged, but their response to the pandemic also seems to harden their resolve and deepen their dependency on Moscow. Whether Moscow can and will increase its backing is an open question, but the DNR/LNR responses so far indicate that the COVID-19 impacts will be not only—and

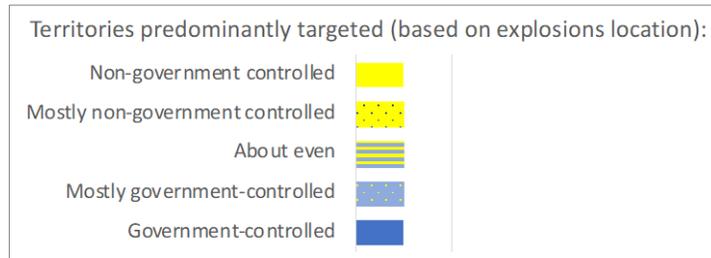
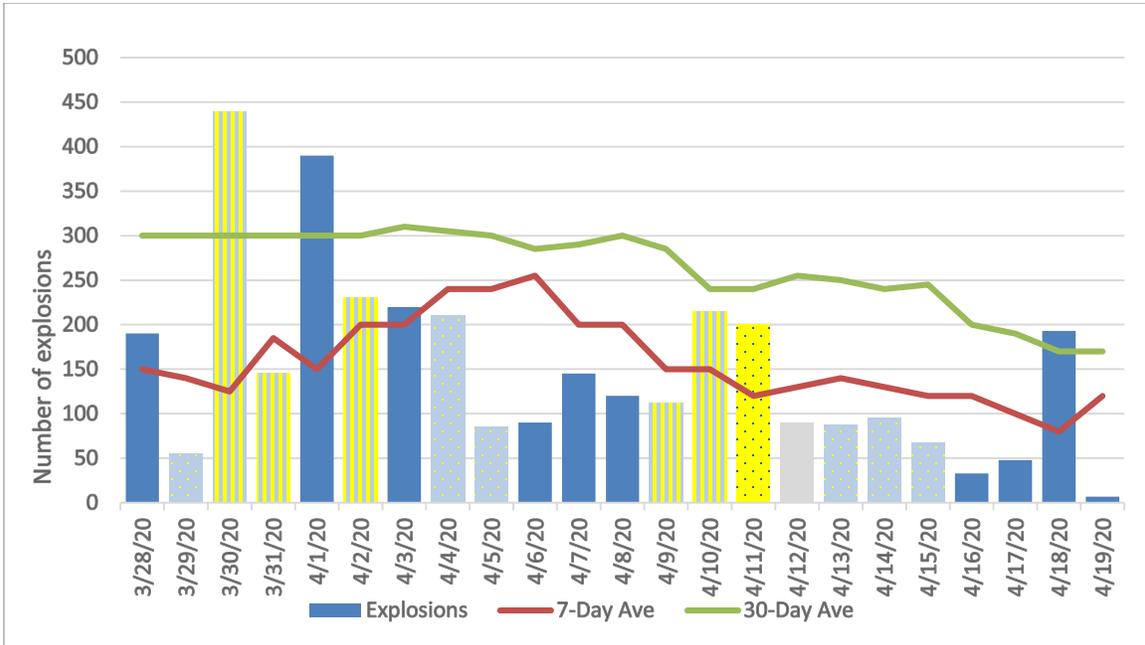
perhaps not even so much—a function of the pandemic’s seriousness, but also a function of resolve to discount the pandemic-induced loss of life on the part of the leadership in the Russia-client statelets. And if the resolve to become part of Russia continues to harden, then the conflict-resolution goals Zelensky has relentlessly pursued since becoming president—notably troop pullouts from contested hotspots—would be unlikely to lead to the reintegration of the Donbas within Ukraine, but threaten to result in a renewed [militarized push](#) into the recent pullout areas, as happened in mid-February. The DNR/LNR leaders also directly state that negotiating with them will not lead to compromises, only to settle on their (Moscow’s) terms. Finally, language matters. Journalists, academics, and officials writing about Ukraine would do well to forego the term “separatist entities” with respect to the DNR/LNR and instead refer to them as “statelets” seeking incorporation into Russia.

Figure 1. The Intensity of Military Confrontation in the Russia-Ukraine Donbas War (January-March 2020)



Source: OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine Status [Reports](#). Note: Weapons refer to those prohibited by Minsk Accords to be stationed near the line of control. OSCE SMM stopped reporting the number of those after April 5, 2020. The number of explosions was not included in reports before February 10, 2020.

Figure 2. While Warfighting in the Donbas Declined in the First Month after COVID Lockdowns, Most Attacks Targeted Ukrainian Government Forces



Source: OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine Daily Reports (based on the assessments of OSCE monitors about the location and direction of attacks resulting in explosions).