

Russian Armed Volunteers Prepare for Action in Eastern Ukraine

As tensions over Ukraine have reached new heights, Russian volunteers are preparing to once again take up arms in the Donbas.

By [Pjotr Sauer](#)

February 10, 2022



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On a cold and windy Saturday morning at a shooting range west of Moscow, a group of men in full military uniform are holding shooting drills.

They are members of the Union of Donbas Volunteers (UDV), a nationalist organization partly made up of former Russian volunteers who have fought intermittently alongside pro-Russian separatist forces in the Donbas region since the conflict began in 2014.

“Conditions in war won’t be easy either, this will keep us in shape for if we need to go back to the Donbas,” Sergei, who declined to give his last name, told The Moscow Times.

While mounting [evidence](#) from independent research groups points to the Kremlin's military involvement in the simmering conflict that has claimed more than 13,000 lives, separatist efforts against Ukrainian government forces have been boosted by Russian volunteers — ordinary citizens like Sergei, with varying degrees of military training, who are keen to join what they see as a just cause.

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The Kremlin has vigorously denied any official ties to the war in the Donbas, saying that any Russians fighting in Eastern Ukrainian are volunteers concerned about alleged threats against the Russian-speaking population in the area from Ukrainian ultranationalists.

Sergei said he joined the fighting in 2014 because he was inspired by the concept of Novorossiya — meaning new Russia — the historical name for a large swathe of southern and eastern Ukraine that became part of imperial Russia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin first revived the idea shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea last March, and the term was subsequently adopted by pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine's east to justify their efforts to spread their anti-Kyiv movement across the country's southeast.

However by late 2015, the Kremlin had largely [abandoned](#) the concept, and many volunteers like Sergei left the region to return to their normal lives in Russia.

But as tensions over Ukraine have reached new heights amid what the West sees as a threatening large scale Russian military build-up on the border with its neighbor, members of the UDV say they are preparing to once again take up arms in the Donbas.

“This chapter never closed for us. If things heat up again, of course, we will arm ourselves and go. We can be easily mobilized,” said Viktor Zaplatin, a senior member of the UDV whose social media indicated he has previously fought in Luhansk in Eastern Ukraine.

“We won’t give up all the hard-fought gains the republics have made,” he added, referring to the region’s breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR).

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Soaring membership

It remains unclear how many volunteers have fought in the Donbas, or what a possible new mobilization would look like.

A representative of UDV, which was founded by Vladislav Surkov, the ex-long-time advisor to President Vladimir Putin who was previously in charge of Russia’s policy in Ukraine, told The Moscow Times that it currently has 49 branches across Russia and that its membership has soared to 14,500 as of this year..

Its main activities now revolve around sending humanitarian aid to DNR and LNR citizens and promoting the cause of the two unrecognized territories across Russia through “educational programmes” and political lobbying.

UDV’s vocal chairman Alexander Boroday, a member of Russia’s Duma lower house of parliament, is a former separatist leader who was de facto prime minister of the self-proclaimed DRP in 2014.

The union last month issued a statement on its official social media saying it has started to mobilize its units as a reaction to “large-scale aggression from Ukraine.”

“The Union of Donbas Volunteers declares that we will not stand aside. Russian volunteers have begun to form units to participate in the defense against Ukrainian aggression,” the statement on Vkontakte said.

It is also unclear what role Russian volunteers would play if new fighting were to break out in Ukraine.

In 2014, the Kremlin openly encouraged volunteerism despite denying involvement in the war, running television programs praising the actions of the fighters. Critics accused the government of using genuine volunteers to disguise its own involvement in the conflict.

This time around, with Russian troops deployed near its border with Ukraine, experts say it is unlikely the Kremlin will have much use for volunteers in case of a full-blown invasion.

“If there is an escalation this time, there will be no pretense: it will be fought by regular Russian soldiers without their needing or being able to hide behind mercenaries and amateurs,” said Mark Galeotti, an analyst at the U.K.’s Royal United Services Institute think tank.

Official recognition

However, Galeotti suggested that volunteers could be useful for Russia if it formally recognizes the two breakaway republics.

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While for a long time Russian authorities have taken a cautious approach to openly backing the DNR and LNR, recent signals hint that the Kremlin is ready to change its approach.

Last month, Russia’s ruling, pro-Kremlin United Russia party for the first time urged the government to deliver military supplies to the separatist regions. Russian lawmakers are scheduled on Feb. 14 to discuss recognizing them. Such a move would mark a major escalation by Russia.

Russia had also fast-tracked the granting of over half a million Russian passports to Donbas residents as of mid-2021. Now, one of the possible Russian invasion scenarios [being discussed](#) by Ukraine is Russian military forces justifying entering Eastern Ukraine to defend the newly

minted local population of Russian citizens.

Donbas volunteers told The Moscow Times they welcomed Russia's apparent embrace of the two unrecognized republics.

"Russia should officially recognize both republics and provide them with all possible military and economic assistance, include both republics in its economic and customs space, give Russian citizenship to all citizens of the republics who wish to get it," said Alexander Kolesnikov, another volunteer who has fought in the Donbas.

Others hoped that this time around Russia would push through and annex Eastern Ukraine.

"We don't think Russia has gone far enough. We have been soft on Ukraine. We are ready to help change that," said Zaplatin.

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