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Kremlin Holds All the Cards as Russia-Backed Separatists Demand Recognition

“All hope is on Putin to recognize the Donbas.”

By Pjotr Sauer and Felix Light

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The Uspenka border checkpoint on the border between Russia and the Donetsk People's Republic.
Valentin Sprinchak / TASS

Amid fresh fighting in eastern Ukraine’s Donbas region and wider tensions between Russia and the West, supporters of the pro-Russian People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk are urging the Kremlin to adopt a more decisive line on their status.

“All hope is on Putin to recognize the Donbas,” Alexander Borodai, the founding leader of the Donetsk People’s Republic, one of two unrecognized pro-Russian states in eastern Ukraine, who now serves as a lawmaker in Russia’s parliament, told The Moscow Times in a phone interview on Thursday.

“I have great expectations. The situation is critical and Ukrainian forces, which far outnumber

ours, are preparing an attack," said Borodai, who provided no evidence for his assertion.

But as fresh fighting broke out along the contact line between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian government forces on Thursday, days after the Russian parliament voted to ask President Vladimir Putin recognize the Donbas republics, questions have arisen as to what extent the separatists are acting on their own accord in escalating the situation on the ground.

"Ultimately, the Donbas will do what Moscow says," said Konstantin Skorkin, a Donbas analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank.

"They are extremely dependent on Moscow, they wouldn't exist without Russian support."

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Since the appearance of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in spring 2014, the Russian-speaking separatist movement has been profoundly dependent on Moscow.

Though Moscow denies militarily supporting the breakaway states, Russian forces are widely believed to be present in the separatist-held areas of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Both regions are also highly dependent on Russia for economic support after they suffered economic collapse during their eight years of unrecognized independence.

Both factors leave the republics largely dependent on the will of Moscow, and experts on the region doubt that the Donbas leadership could be escalating the crisis without Moscow's say-so.

"It's hard to imagine the republics doing much without Moscow's permission," said Skorkin,

Skorkin described a situation where major policy questions in the People's Republics are closely supervised by Russia, with a Kremlin "curator" in the form of presidential advisor Dmitry Kozak making all but the most mundane decisions.

"Everything else comes from Moscow," he said.

The Donbas' dependency on Russia is partly the result of careful cultivation by Moscow.

Though the People's Republics were initially headed by a mixture of local separatist activists and incomers from Russia involved in the 2014 unrest, the Kremlin worked to replace unpredictable local firebrands with pliable functionaries.

Analysts attributed the murky assassination of Donetsk People's Republic prime minister Alexander Zakharchenko in 2018, and the forced ouster of his Luhansk counterpart Igor Plotnitsky the year before to power struggles, as independent-minded leaders were replaced by Moscow's preferred candidates.

Likewise, Igor Girkin, who also goes by the alias Strelkov, the nationalist paramilitary commander who played a crucial role in creating the People's Republics and allegedly

commanded the shooting down of MH-17, is now largely sidelined from political life in Russia.

“Previously, there were leaders in the Donbas who were more independent minded, or at least focussed on enriching themselves,” said Nikolaus von Twickel, a Berlin-based Eastern Ukraine analyst.

“But they were sidelined or replaced. Now, the leaders are essentially puppets of Moscow.”

Today, von Twickel noted, both People’s Republics are dominated by defected former officers of the SBU, Ukraine’s internal security service, many of whom have close ties to their colleagues in the Russian FSB.

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Officially, Russia remains committed to the Donbas returning to Ukrainian sovereignty with extensive autonomy, under the 2015 Minsk Agreements.

But the People’s Republics’ leaders themselves have tended to prefer outright annexation by Moscow.

With Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy ruling out the direct negotiations with the separatists required under the Minsk agreements, Borodai and others see an opening to push for a decisive break with Ukraine for the Donbas.

Simultaneously, Moscow’s commitment to the Minsk process has been called into question by increasingly aggressive rhetoric in Russia.

On Tuesday, Putin claimed that Kyiv was committing "genocide" in the region, while Russian state media aired a number of programs purportedly showing secret mass graves in the region and the potential for Ukrainian forces to use chemical weapons against the people of the Donbas.

With major ceasefire violations occurring on Thursday at Stanitsa Luhanska, one of the few operational crossing points between separatist- and Kyiv-held territory, Borodai and other senior Donbas officials have warned Moscow that a new confrontation with Ukraine is “inevitable.”

Speaking to The Moscow Times, Borodai was careful not to criticize Putin personally, but said that certain Russian officials were “naive” for believing Ukraine would implement the Minsk agreements in the future.

“Of course, we should have recognized the Donbas earlier, but because of certain tactical decisions, the political will was not there,” he said.

“Within the Russian establishment, there are those who say we should implement Minsk, that we shouldn't bury them. But you can’t bury something that was never alive.”

Even so, with Putin having told German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Tuesday that he would not recognize the Donbas republics for the time being, the separatist movement's leaders' influence on the Kremlin seems more limited than ever.

"I don't think Putin will drag out the decision [on the Donbas]," said Borodai.

"But of course, I can't speak for him."

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