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Russian Officials Take Office in Separatist Eastern Ukraine

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United Russia Party General Council Secretary Andrei Turchak, St Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov and Donetsk People's Republic leader Denis Pushilin (L-R front). **Nikolai Trishin/TASS**

Senior Russian government officials have for the first time been appointed as members of eastern Ukraine's Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) separatist administration amid growing signs that Russia could permanently occupy captured territories during the invasion.

DNR leader Denis Pushilin named former Russian Industry and Trade Ministry department head Vitaly Khotsenko as the head of the breakaway region's so-called Council of Ministers.

Russian media say Khotsenko, 36, is the first high-ranking Russian government official to hold public office in the DNR.

Born in central Ukraine's city of Dnipro, Khotsenko had served as energy minister in southern Russia's Stavropol region and, since 2019, head of industrial policy and project management in the Russian Trade Ministry.

Pushilin, who announced the reshuffle on Wednesday, named two other senior Russian officials as Khotsenko's deputies.

Yevgeny Solntsev had served as adviser to Russia's Construction, Housing and Utilities Minister, while Alexander Kostomarov was deputy governor of western Russia's Lipetsk and Ulyanovsk regions.

Pushilin said the new executive team faces a "broad range" of tasks, including post-war reconstruction and "integration" with Russia.

"Despite the fact that the liberation campaign is underway and we haven't yet reached the constitutional borders... we need to think not one, but two steps ahead," he said.

The Kremlin said Thursday it supports the appointments, adding that "there had been an exchange of views" on the new hires with the presidential administration.

Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized the DNR and the neighboring Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) as independent days ahead of ordering troops to invade Ukraine in February.

The separatist leaders of the DNR and LNR and Moscow-appointed authorities in captured southern and eastern Ukrainian territories have indicated they would like to become part of Russia.

The Kremlin has not publicly confirmed or denied whether the territories would be absorbed by Russia, emphasizing the "will of the people" on future decisions.

Several Russian regions, including Moscow and St. Petersburg, have in recent weeks publicly pledged infrastructure support in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions known collectively as the Donbas.

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