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Guest post: Donbas has been split into pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian enclaves

Guest writer Dec 11 17:26 5 comments



By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

A year ago I took the seven hour Hyundai Rotem intercity train from Kiev to Donetsk, introduced on this and two other routes for the Uefa Euro 2012 football championship to carry supporters to Ukraine's newly built stadiums. The journey is now two hours shorter as the train only goes as far as Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, situated 30 kilometres from the front line of the Russian occupied enclave of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR).

Donetsk airport, also built for the Uefa tournament, is in ruins, held by volunteer battalions and Ukrainian airborne units who have benefited from two decades of cooperation with Nato's Partnership for Peace programme. With the airport being held against all odds, the Ukrainian media has nicknamed the airborne forces 'Cyborgs'. Russia's defence ministry admitted for the first time this week to losing 300 special forces in failed assaults against them.



A former hospital near Slovyansk. Photo: Taras Kuzio



An apartment building in Slovyansk. Photo: Taras Kuzio

On April 12, Slovyansk and Kramatorsk became the first cities in the Donbas to be occupied by Russian ‘green men’ – military intelligence special forces without country insignia. They provided experience, self-confidence and weapons for local pro-Russian separatists.

Support for separatism in the Donbas, at 30 per cent, has always been higher than in the other six Russian-speaking regions of eastern and southern Ukraine. Being a sympathiser did though not necessarily translate into action, as civil society has always been weaker in eastern than western Ukraine.

Separatist feeling was heavily fanned by Russian television, the primary source of news in the Donbas, and rested on four factors:

First, an angry response to the ‘putsch’ in Kiev that overthrew President Viktor Yanukovich whom locals describe as ‘a bandit, but our bandit.’

Second, a widespread belief that the standard of living is higher in Russia, where per capita income is four times that in Ukraine. This sentiment was especially pervasive among the Communist Party, which was a major organiser of anti-Euromaidan meetings.

Separatists attracted what political scientists call ‘losers’ in the post-Soviet transition, who are susceptible to populist slogans. Middle class locals, such as the members of the Slovyansk Rotary Club and local businessmen in Kramatorsk, had no time for separatism.

Third, the legitimacy given to separatism by the Church. Serhiy Demidovych, a Protestant pastor in Slovyansk, told me the support given by the Russian Orthodox Church to separatists was seen as an ‘Orthodox jihad’. Some Russian Orthodox priests in the Donbas had for several years helped train young believers who would later join the Russian Orthodox Army, one of a number of DNR Russian volunteer battalions fighting for the ‘Orthodox faith’ and the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World).



Serhiy Demidovych, Protestant pastor in Slovyansk. Photo: Taras Kuzio

Denys Bihunov, a political adviser to the city hall in Slovyansk, and Ihor Rybalchenko, the town's police chief, point to the sudden appearance of large numbers of weapons. Other local people told me of weapons being transported in coffins from the Crimea and stored in Russian Orthodox churches. Other weapons were confiscated from the police and security service, whose members defected en masse to the separatists and Russian forces.



Former security service headquarters, Slovyansk. Photo: Taras Kuzio

Fourth, hitherto marginal pan-Slavic groups such as the Russia Bloc and Kiev Rus, whose members were elected to parliament and local councils by the Communist Party and Party of Regions.

This eclectic alliance of Communists, Russian Orthodox and nationalists was swelled by a large criminal element and Russian Cossacks in Luhansk. Viacheslav Ponomariov, Slovyansk's 'people's mayor' is widely accused in the city of having a criminal past. He fled after Ukrainian forces liberated the city.

Citizens complain that local criminals and Cossacks used the chaos and Russian occupation as a cover for widespread car theft; criminals and Cossacks are accused of looting Ukrainian, western and Russia humanitarian assistance, with the situation becoming so critical in the Luhansk Peoples Republic (LNR), where there are reports of people dying of hunger, that Russian forces have driven the Cossacks out.

During what people in Slovyansk call 'the occupation', which lasted until July 4, the separatist administration pursued a hard-line authoritarian regime commonly found in the DNR and the LNR. Pro-Ukrainian activists such as Martyros Grigorian, a member of the

Fatherland Party, went into hiding for three months. He recalls an incident when separatists argued over whether or not to execute a Protestant pastor and went to ask advice from a Russian Orthodox priest, who advised against; he was lucky and told to leave town. Others were less lucky: two sons of another Protestant pastor and two others were tortured and executed.



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Remains of a house near Slovyansk. Photo: Taras Kuzio

Few of Slovyansk’s residents want the Russians to return. The peak of their euphoria in the spring, when they expected Russia’s annexation of Crimea to be repeated in the Donbas, is long gone. Into the political vacuum, hitherto cowed pro-Ukrainian activists such as the energetic Mykhaylo Nechiporenko, leader of *Hurtom* (‘Stand Together’) a Slovyansk NGO, organises the Donbas’s only Automaidan each week and promotes direct action for greater transparency and the removal of corrupt officials.

Vladimir Putin, Russia’s president, has failed in his attempt to split Ukraine in two, but at the unfortunate cost of over 10,000 military and civilian lives and massive destruction of property. Pro-Ukrainians and pro-Russians have moved to opposite sides of the September ceasefire line, which is becoming a de facto border.

With pro-Russian forces discredited, having fled or gone into hiding, and Ukrainian military forces, National Guard volunteers and militarised police units heavily in force in the strategically important Slovyansk region, and as falling oil prices and sanctions bite hard into Russia’s economy, it would be foolhardy – not to say impossible – for Russia to seek to occupy the two thirds of the Donbas controlled by Kiev.

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