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The "Donbasionisation" of Russia: How occupation is influencing Russia's political system

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SWP Comment

NO. 22 MAY 2025

The “Donbatisation” of Russia

How Occupation Is Influencing Russia’s Political System

Nikolay Petrov

Russia is going to great lengths to ensure that the war in Ukraine is perceived by its citizens as a distant military operation that does not affect them directly. But the consequences of both the war and the forced integration of the occupied Ukrainian territories are large-scale, diverse and tangible throughout Russia. They include the growing number of human losses, criminalisation and legal nihilism. Moreover, the spread of gangster-like norms and practices from the occupied territories to Russia proper could eventually lead to the “Donbatisation” of Russia.

Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 based on the tenuous assumption that it could defeat the neighbouring country in a matter of days or weeks at most. During what is now more than three years, the invasion has inflicted enormous damage on Ukraine: millions of people have been injured, killed, displaced and/or traumatised. Like any other war of aggression, Russia’s war against Ukraine is having a profoundly deforming effect on the aggressor country. Russian soldiers and informal fighters are being killed and maimed, their families and entire communities are bereaved. Russian society is undergoing a process of moral degradation and de-modernisation imposed by the regime in order to perpetuate the conflict.

Currently, there are two realities that have the potential to profoundly transform the existing Russian political system and ruling political class. First, the Russian state has to deal with a huge number of war

veterans returning from the battlefield. Their return poses a significant threat to the country’s political stability as a result of the emergence of a vast and organised mass of armed individuals not suited to peaceful civilian life.

Second, the Russian state also has to govern the Ukrainian territories it occupies and promote their forced integration into the Russian political space. It is doing so by sending administrative personnel from the Russian regions to the occupied territories. These “new regions” — together with Crimea and Sevastopol, which were annexed in 2014 — are becoming what is called in Russian a “personnel forge”: hundreds and thousands of officials are being selected to transfer to these regions and undergo training there. In short, the occupied regions are producing a new type of Russian administrative elite.



(No) time for heroes

In his presidential address of 29 February 2024, Vladimir Putin declared that those taking part in the so-called Special Military Operation (SMO — the Kremlin’s euphemism for Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine) should become the “real elite” of Russia and replace those who enriched themselves in the 1990s and still hold leading positions within the state apparatus. That declaration signalled the start of the “Time of Heroes” programme, which was launched immediately after Putin’s speech. The programme provides training over two years (including four full-time one-month modules) and is overseen by the Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, which the Kremlin uses to implement new approaches to training administrative elites and personnel. For example, the academy has been running the “Leaders of Russia” programme and the “School of Governors” project since 2017 and launched the “School of Mayors” programme in 2023.

According to official sources, the first call for applications for the “Time of Heroes” programme attracted 44,000 candidates, from which just 83 were selected. Training began in mid-May 2024. First, the programme participants were sent to the North Pole on the icebreaker *50 Years of Victory*. Later, they attended lectures by leading government officials and managers, including First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Sergei Kirienko, who is the programme curator, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov. The programme also includes practice-oriented internships mentored by high-ranking officials within the presidential administration, federal ministries and departments, the State Duma and the Federation Council, as well as regional authorities and major state-owned companies.

Before even completing the programme, two dozen or so first-year participants were appointed to new positions in September —

October 2024. The most prominent among them was Artem Zhoga, a former field commander and speaker of the “parliament” of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR). At a meeting between Vladimir Putin and war veterans in December 2023, Zhoga had been instructed to ask the head of state to run again in the upcoming presidential elections. Putin later responded by recommending him as a candidate for the “Time of Heroes” programme, from which he would normally have been disqualified owing to his lack of a higher education. Zhoga was appointed presidential envoy to the Urals Federal District in October 2024 and is now a figurehead for the political integration of war veterans.

Other “Time of Heroes” alumni have become senators of the Kursk region, the Altai Republic and the annexed Crimea. Others have gone on to work in the presidential administration or in state enterprises such as Russian Railways and the Federal Air Transport Agency, the Samara Research and Production Centre for Unmanned Aircraft Systems and Rosatom. And the post of head of the “Movement of the First”, an all-Russian organisation for children and young people founded by Putin in December 2022, has been filled by a “Time of Heroes” participant.

Many other programme participants have been given high-ranking posts in the regions, including that of minister of youth and social communications (Republic of Sakha), deputy chairman of the Committee on Law Order and Security of St Petersburg and chairman of the Duma of the city of Nizhny Novgorod.

The positions to which SMO veterans have been appointed are largely irrelevant and limited to areas of secondary importance, such as sports and patriotic education, within regional administrations and various ministries as well as state-owned companies. Even Artem Zhoga’s post as presidential plenipotentiary of the Urals Federal District is one of status rather than purpose: in the past, such positions served to provide an honorary pension for leading officials. This only goes to show that even

in the Russian system — where bureaucrats are not required to be independent and almost anyone can perform the function of transmitting a signal from the top to the bottom — there is no way that the real levers of control would be entrusted to completely unprepared hands.

It has also been evident during the past year that the “heroes” of the SMO enjoy little popularity within Russian society. According to the results of the regional and municipal elections in September 2024, SMO veterans who ran as candidates — and were actively promoted by the Kremlin — won only 331 out of more than 30,000 mandates. Thirty-four of those veterans were admitted to the new convocations of regional parliaments (equivalent to some 5 per cent of the 659 mandates distributed at this level), 46 to the councils of regional capitals (7.5 per cent of the 610 mandates) and 233 to the municipal bodies of smaller cities and towns (less than 1 per cent).

One possible reason why citizens are not inclined to vote for veterans of the SMO is that the Kremlin depicts the war in Ukraine as far removed from, and irrelevant to, the everyday life of ordinary citizens but at the same time is afraid to seek to capitalise on the topic of war — unpopular among Russians — during the election campaigns. Because volunteers receive huge sums from the Russian authorities for signing up to serve, they are perceived by the majority as “soldiers of fortune”, lucky to have survived and earned money to boot, rather than national heroes; and this allows the Kremlin to avert any widespread public discontent over the war losses.

Moreover, many of the veterans come from two social groups that command little respect or appreciation in Russian society: bureaucrats and criminals serving prison sentences who were mobilized by private military companies like “Wagner” and the Ministry of Defence. The Kremlin’s attempts to promote such individuals have been mostly unsuccessful — as, for example, in the elections for the head of the Republic of Khakassia in September 2023. In the September 2024 elections, the overwhelming

majority of newly elected deputies with a military past ran on the lists of the ruling United Russia party.

‘Heroes’ programme in the regions

At the United Russia congress in Moscow in December 2024, Putin expressed the wish that the “Time of Heroes” programme should be replicated at the regional level, “as has already been done in the Stavropol Territory, in the Belgorod, Voronezh, Ryazan, Samara [and] Tula regions and in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District”. Putin also noted that United Russia members should ensure SMO participants are actively involved in party projects, in order to support “talented, goal-oriented people” who can serve as role models for the younger generation.

Accordingly, the regions rushed to launch local versions of the “Time of Heroes” programme and created government posts for those graduating from it. In the Saratov region, the special post of deputy head of the local administration with responsibility for patriotic education was introduced at the regional and district level. In Yakutia, the heads of regional and municipal districts were instructed to appoint SMO veterans to similar posts as in Saratov. And at least two graduates of the “Time of Heroes” programme have become heads of large municipal councils (Nizhny Novgorod and Tomsk).

Since 2025, the Moscow region has offered SMO veterans training in four areas: “civil activist”, “manager”, “profile specialist” and “entrepreneur”. For its part, the Voronezh region now has a comprehensive rehabilitation programme in which SMO participants are able to learn one of 13 professions.

From the above, it seems that the integration of war veterans into government structures is proceeding more rapidly in the Russian regions than at the federal level. This increases the risk that regional governance — already poor — will deteriorate.

rate even further. And while war veterans do not yet pose a real threat to the Kremlin owing to their relatively small number, hundreds of thousands of armed and traumatised veterans will return to Russia when, eventually, demobilisation takes place. They will be accustomed to the laws of a bloody war and many of them will find it difficult to return to civilian life. Uprooted from society, imbued with cynicism and dehumanised, they could become a serious threat for Russia's political and societal stability.

Russian administrative personnel in the occupied territories

Over the past three years or so, hundreds of Russian officials at various levels have been passing through the occupied territories. They include officials sent to perform shift work within the occupation administrations, those who visited cities, administrative districts and military units under the patronage system (see below) and those who saw the SMO as a career opportunity or a chance to atone for past actions.

Data from 2024 show that in the occupied regions, just under half of leading civil servants — that is, at the level of deputy prime minister or higher — are local elites. In the case of the DPR and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), these are groups that have formed over more than a decade of "independence". In the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, they comprise mainly Ukrainian officials who aligned with Russia following the occupation. However, a growing majority of civil servants in the occupied territories as a whole are from Russia. Among the officials examined, almost one in five (seven out of 37) worked at the Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade, while others came from the Russian Ministry of Economic Development, other federal ministries and various Russian regions.

The Russian regions are also involved in the administration of the occupied territories. They send personnel to the territories under the patronage system that was

first implemented in 2014 and revived in 2022. For example, the Vologda region assumed patronage of Alchevsk in the LPR and Alexei Lysov, who came from Vologda, was initially deputy head of the local administration before taking over as deputy prime minister of Zaporizhzhia. At the beginning of the war, the Krasnodar region became patron of the Kharkov region and Andrei Alekseenko, the former mayor of Krasnodar, went there before assuming the post of prime minister of the Kherson region. Sevastopol is patron of Melitopol, the capital of the occupied Zaporizhzhia region, which may well explain the large number of people from Crimea in the regional administration. Municipal officials from Russia proper are also represented in the leadership of the occupied territories. For example, Yegor Kovalchuk, currently serving as prime minister of the LPR, was previously mayor of Miass in the Chelyabinsk region. Notably, in almost every case, the post given to a civil servant in the "new region" involves a promotion, often a significant one.

At the same time, the Kremlin is keen to avoid the perception that the regional administrations of the "new regions" are occupation authorities. The outsiders appointed as heads of regional governments tend not to bring their own people or only a very small number, opting instead to work with the teams already in place. The notable exception was Vitaly Khotsenko, who arrived in the DPR in the summer of 2022 with a large team; however, by the following year, both he and his colleagues had returned to Russia. Meanwhile, some officials "escape" to the occupied territories after facing legal issues in their home regions; however, this does not bar them from being appointed to high office. Prominent examples are Andrei Alekseenko, who became prime minister of the Kherson region, and Oleg Koltunov, who, despite having fallen into disrepute, was later appointed internal affairs minister of Zaporizhzhia.

Occupation as career booster: High expectations, sober reality

When regional administrations were being established in the occupied territories in 2022, it was widely thought that working there would offer a range of career opportunities to newly arrived officials and could serve as a springboard for professional advancement. But in reality, such prospects have proved very limited. Of those officials who have worked in the occupied territories, just three – or five if the “Time of Heroes” programme is taken into account – have gone on to become governors, mostly of smaller regions.

Vitaly Khotsenko, who had headed a department at the Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade before assuming the post of prime minister of the DPR, returned to Russia within less than a year to take up the post of governor of the Omsk region. Vladislav Kuznetsov, who had served as deputy leader of the Kurgan region before being appointed deputy prime minister of the LPR, became head of Chukotka on his return to Russia.

Yevgeny Pervyshov, the former mayor of Krasnodar and later a State Duma deputy, volunteered in October 2022 to join the combat army reserve unit called “Cascade”, in which deputies and officials serve under relatively comfortable conditions. In May 2024, he joined the “Time of Heroes” programme; and, six months later, in November 2024, he was appointed acting governor of the Tambov region.

Maria Kostyuk, head of the “Time of Heroes” programme, was appointed acting governor of the Jewish Autonomous Region in November 2024. Irina Gekht, formerly first deputy governor of the Chelyabinsk region, was named head of the government of the Zaporizhzhia region in May 2024 but remained in office for less than a year. Following a conflict with the governor of the region, she was transferred to serve as acting governor of the Nenets Autonomous District.

Above all, it is career-driven officials who choose to work in the occupied territories

in the hope of being rapidly promoted thereafter. Many are alumni of the Kremlin’s “School of Governors” programme and have taken part in the “Leaders of Russia” competition, launched in 2017 by Sergei Kirienko, who became the Kremlin’s overseer of the occupied territories after the beginning of the war. Financial incentives play a role, too: in the “new regions”, officials can earn two to three times more than in Russia.

Some officials – typically from regions that have assumed patronage of parts of the occupied territories – are dispatched on shorter-term assignments (for example, lasting just several months). Under a Russian government decree, they receive double their salary while serving there.

On average, officials remain in the “new regions” for about 18 months. But the length of stay can vary widely: some Russians who began working in Donbas before the full-scale war or shortly after it had begun continue to serve there to this day, while others have remained for less than six months. It is relatively rare for an official who has worked in one of the occupied territories of Ukraine to return to the region where they previously served.

While there is not yet sufficient material evidence to make broad generalisations, it seems there is concern among the Russian political establishment about the conduct of officials who, after spending time in the occupied regions, have been reassigned to new positions back in Russia. “The fact is that in the annexed territories, officials ‘learn to handle’ budget funds allocated for ‘restoration’ with far too much freedom – even by the standards of the Russian civil service,” one regional official told Meduza, an independent Russian media outlet in exile. The same official described the situation in the occupied territories as a “real school of corruption”.

Career paths in education and culture

The “new regions” have already become an important training ground for managers in Russian education and culture. Hundreds of ambitious bureaucrats and academics between the age of 30 and 40 have been transferred there, and many of those now occupying key positions in culture and education in Russia were selected – and their views and outlook shaped – while serving in the occupied territories. These individuals could form the backbone of a new management elite in both fields.

The more than three years that have passed since the Russian occupation of Ukrainian territories is too short a time to be able to fully assess the career trajectories of officials who have served in those regions – especially outside the top tiers of regional bureaucracies. However, the outlines of a broader trend are beginning to emerge from the few career paths documented so far.

For example, Dmitry Sidorov, former minister of culture of the LPR and a graduate of the Russian Ministry of Culture’s “Higher School of Managers in the Sphere of Culture” programme, was appointed head of the Moscow Institute of Culture in 2025. A former classmate of his, Roman Oleksin, was recently named minister of culture of the Zaporizhzhia region. And another young career official, Igor Narozhny, formerly a department head at the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) in Moscow, took over from Sidorov as minister of culture of the LPR.

Sidorov, born in the Luhansk region in 1989, is the first Russian university rector to come from “Novorossiya”. After 2014, he started building his career under the new authorities, serving as a local deputy in Luhansk and organising pseudo-patriotic events. His efforts did not go unnoticed: he was appointed minister of culture, sports and youth of the LPR in 2017 and, following an overhaul of the regional government structure, minister of culture in 2023. Two years later, he transferred to Moscow to take up his current post.

His successor, Igor Narozhny, was born in 1989, too, and graduated from RUDN University. Initially, he had a modest academic career, rising slowly through the ranks to become a senior lecturer. In 2023, his career took off when he was appointed deputy rector of the Luhansk Academy of Culture and Arts and, some 18 months later, minister of culture of the LPR.

Among Narozhny’s colleagues in the LPR government is Ivan Kuskov, the minister of education, who was born in 1987 and graduated from Moscow State University. In April 2014, he was appointed deputy director for development at the Sevastopol branch of Moscow State University; one year later, he took over as director. Having worked as deputy rector of Sevastopol State University from 2019 onwards, he was named minister of education of the LPR in 2022.

Oleg Trofimov has served as minister of education and science of the DPR since August 2024. Born in Tyumen in 1986, he graduated and earned a PhD from the local university and eventually became a deputy head of department there. After winning the “Leaders of Russia” competition, he was appointed deputy minister of education of the DPR in July 2022, even before the region had been formally annexed by Russia. Two years later, he assumed the post of minister of education and science.

Trofimov’s predecessor, Olga Koludarova, was born in far-off Izhevsk in 1983. Having begun her career in a lowly position at the Ministry of Education and Science of Udmurtia, she later transferred to Moscow to serve as a deputy departmental head at the Russian Ministry of Education and Science. She was appointed minister of education of the DPR in July 2022 and was promoted to the post of deputy minister of education of the Russian Federation in 2024.

Igor Astanin, minister of youth policy of the Kherson region, was born in Astrakhan in 1991. A former leader of the local branch of the pro-Kremlin “Nashi” youth movement, he worked on election campaigns in various regions. In 2022, he was appointed to the post of deputy rector of the Kherson Pedagogical University and, in August 2023,

to his current position as minister of youth policy.

Such career trajectories are illustrative but few and far between. The number of young careerists in education and culture who have flocked to “Novorossiia” far exceeds the number of ministerial positions available, even taking into account the high turnover. In 2023, no fewer than 29 universities in the “new territories” were granted the same legal status as Russian universities; and this has led to an influx of administrators from Russia’s higher education system. Thus, it can be seen that the “new territories” have already become an important “personnel forge” for management structures in Russian education and culture.

Conclusions

The integration of war veterans into Russia’s administrative class remains largely illusory. Those who have taken part in the “Time of Heroes” programme are appointed to politically irrelevant, symbolic positions within the bureaucracy. Moreover, their number is limited. That said, it cannot be guaranteed that the Kremlin will be able to ensure there is no political fallout in the future, particularly as the number of people returning from the front will increase sharply. The gradual integration of a large number of war veterans could become a major challenge to the established political class and threaten the stability of the Russian autocracy.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin’s attempts to accelerate the integration of the occupied Ukrainian territories into Russia’s political and economic space are confronted with the same challenges as those in Crimea after 2014, albeit on a much larger scale. The ambiguous legal environment of this “grey zone,” along with the opportunities for career advancement, attracts a wide range of careerists and adventurers. Upon their return to Russia, they have not only

internalised the practice of circumventing laws and civil service norms; they have also acquired the coveted status of “hero”.

In this context, Chechnya may serve as a historical precedent. During and after the second Chechen war, the practice of rotating law enforcement officers from other Russian regions led to the widespread normalisation of lawlessness, torture and police brutality throughout the country. Sending mid-level managers to “Novorossiia” fosters the spread of behavioural standards and governance practices that are typical of occupation zones. In addition, it contributes to the formation of networks of people who share the experiences and identity acquired during stints in the occupied Ukrainian territories. Once the individuals who have passed through those territories reach a critical mass in the federal and regional administrations, they could start to pose a serious problem for the Kremlin.

After more than three years of full-scale war and occupation, the negative repercussions for Russia’s political system and [administrative] class are evident. The process of “Donbasiisation” will continue to lead to a deterioration in the quality of governance and will have an influence on the future development of both the Russian state and society.



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