

Would it be an advantage to include Donbas within Russia's borders?

The war in Donbas broke out six years ago, and there is no sign of any effort to peacefully end it, except for a few cease-fires, which did not stand for long. From the beginning of March 2014, in the aftermath of the Ukrainian revolution and the Euromaidan movement, protests by Russia-backed anti-government separatist groups took place in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine. With the strong support from Russia and the inefficient reaction of the Ukrainian government, which held the "Anti-Terrorist Operation" (ATO), separatists quickly seized the eastern part of the country. Since then, Donbas has been a battlefield, and neither side of the conflict is inclined to resign. Ukraine wants to regain their land and Russia indicates that the majority of the population in that region are Russian, who prefer to stay in their property but under Kremlin's watch. This war has already lasted longer than the Second World War. Moreover, Crimea became a part of the Russian Federation in 2014. A possible creation of another A2/AD (similar to Kaliningrad) poses a military threat for the international community and the NATO countries.

The primary research is concentrated on current changes in the conflicted regions. The author verifies international and national reports, articles and publications which provide a comprehensive outlook on the situation in Donbass. Furthermore, the key method is in-depth interviews with experts. Eventually, the survey is based on five years of research, which included a study trip to Ukraine.

The main research question is if the annexation of Donbas would be a real advantage for Russia. Dozens of researchers focus on the current conflict and its consequences for Europe. It is sporadic to find a scientific approach towards the idea that the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts might be included within Russia's borders. A look from a different perspective is indispensable for future research about the war in eastern Ukraine. Some many disadvantages and difficulties make it challenging to have this territory livable again, including but not limited to: minefields, buildings damaged by the use of military equipment, barren land due to excessive use of oils and fuels, destroyed crops, lack of natural fauna and flora. Moreover, most of the population has fled to other oblasts, higher education, culture and art are not developing, and everything is still tense on the grounds of nationalistic and cultural Ukrainian-Russian struggle in the region. Ultimately, the pandemic of the Covid-19 caused further threats for both countries. In the Russian Federation there is more than 1 million cases and in Ukraine more than 120 thousand.

It seems that even if Russia wants to continue to annex Donbas it is not possible under the sanitary situation. It means that the Coronavirus buys time for Ukrainian President.

It is essential to underline that in the coming months no elections will be held in the area of Donbass. The Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts are neither part of a Ukrainian municipal election nor a local Russian election. This causes stagnation in anticipation for another step from any side. It is rather less likely that support for that case will come from the international community such as the Normandy Format or the Minsk Protocol, backed by the OSCE. The problem must be resolved by the engaged parties, where V. Zelensky and V. Putin find the agreement. Nonetheless, new military trainings are in the calendar. In September 2020 Russia starts its "Caucas 2020", which will cause next military movements in Donbass. On the other hand, Ukraine will start the "Joint Effort 2020" exercises in the eastern part of the country. It will be another tense situation for both countries, and Donbass is in the middle of it.

A possible annexation of Donbass will have an impact on the global order. All the NATO forces will be put on standby and the Baltic States will, for sure, decide to react to that move. In this case, Ukraine will have to enhance the protection of other oblasts on the border with Donbass. On the other hand, the Russia Federation will have to rebuild the region, support its inhabitants and provide all materials needed to live in the area. The line of the front will move westwards with no guarantee that the Ukrainian government (and its military forces) will accept that annexation, as they did with Crimea. Including Donbass into Russia could be a part of a long-term strategy which would allow the Kremlin to recreate the Soviet Union with Ukraine and Belarus being a part of it. Even if it might be possible with Minsk, Kyiv is currently too strongly tied to the European Union and the NATO.

It highly unlikely that the Russian Federation will incorporate Donbass, although it is true that the Kremlin needs to show that they have power and influence in Central and Eastern Europe. Having a position as a strong international player, Moscow can negotiate and discuss important matters for the country. As long as the war in Donbass, which is not (yet) Russian territory, does not lead to international interventions against Russia, it seems to be a very useful card in the deck to play with other superpowers. Currently, Donbass is still a battlefield, and there is no sign of any improvement, which is for sure a disadvantage for Ukraine. However, Russia's takeover of it is also not beneficial for Russia.