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EKA JAVAKHISHVILI

187

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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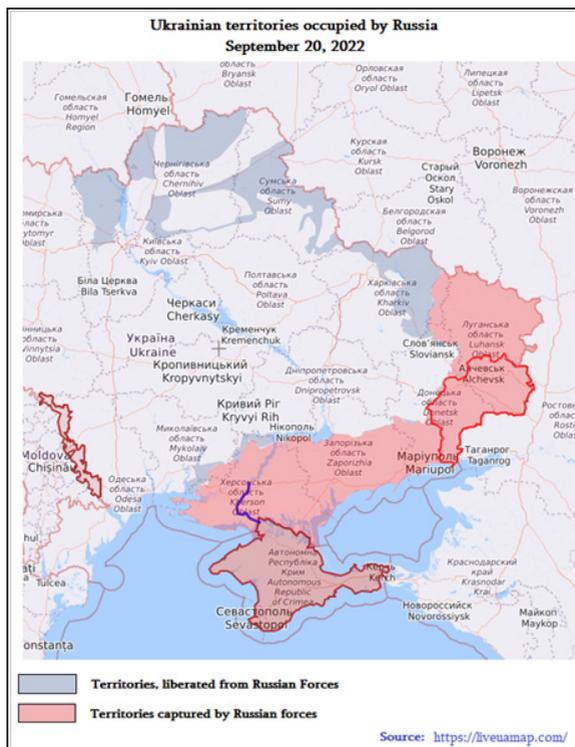
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Introduction

Six months after Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow was forced to change the plan of the military operation because of the unyielding resistance of the Ukrainian army and its unanimous support from the West. At the beginning of September, the Ukrainian army launched a strong counter-offensive and regained control over a large part of the temporarily occupied territories. At this stage, the Russian occupation forces are unable to move forward but are trying to keep the territories they have captured since the beginning of the war. As a result of the counterattack, the Ukrainian army has almost completely liberated the Kharkiv region while heavy fighting continues in the direction of the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk regions. It should be noted that the territory occupied by Russia in the southeast of Ukraine (Kherson and Zaporizhzhia districts) forms a land corridor that connects Russia directly with the Crimean peninsula. So, maintenance control over these regions is one of the main tasks of Russian forces.



After the Russian military forces occupied strategic regions through hostilities, the Kremlin's agenda was to start the process of integrating the seized territories with the Russian Federation. Moscow has repeatedly stated that residents of the territories controlled by Russia have the right to decide for themselves whether or not they want to join Russia. In the summer, the so-called "people's republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as the military-civilian administrations of the newly occupied Kherson and Zaporizhzhia districts, started to prepare to hold "referendums" on joining Russia. However, in light of the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive launched in September, the Kremlin's occupation measures have been accelerated.

Taking into account that Russia's military-technical resources within the framework of the "special military operation" are gradually running out, the Kremlin was faced with the need to announce a partial military mobilization across the country. On September 21, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on partial mobilization in Russia. According to the president, this decision was taken to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia and ensure the security of the Russian people. Addressing the population, Putin expressed his support for the decision of the people of Donbas and the "liberated territories" to hold referendums on joining the Russian Federation.

At present, the main challenge of the Kremlin is to speed up the entry of the occupied territories of Ukraine into the Russian Federation. At the same time, some legitimate questions arise: how is Russia going to incorporate the sovereign territory of Ukraine into its borders and what measures is it taking on the occupied territories to prepare for this process? Will it repeat the "Crimean scenario" or add something new to its occupation methodology?

Observing Russia's occupation policy shows that the Kremlin generally uses one "template" approach to its occupied territories which implies military intervention at the first stage, then declaring the annexed territory an "independent state" and later integrating it into the Russian Federation based on a sham referendum. The measures implemented in the occupied territories are identical everywhere: the creation of a pro-Russian government, passportisation, deportation, total control of the population, change of the education system in favor of the Russian model and other attempts of Russification. Below, we will discuss in detail the activities of

the Russian occupiers in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as well as Kherson and Zaporizhzhia vis-à-vis annexing Ukraine.

Russian Occupation Measures

Sham Referendums

The international community often considers a repetition of the “Crimean scenario” as one of the possible way of Russia’s annexation of Ukraine’s territories. What does this scenario mean? In February 2014, Russian military forces occupied the Crimean peninsula and power was then transferred to a pro-Russian government. On March 11, the Supreme Council of Crimea and the City Council of Sevastopol adopted the Declaration of Independence of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol. At the referendum held on March 16, the population supported the idea of withdrawal from Ukraine and the creation of an independent state of Crimea while at the same time - joining the Russian Federation as a new entity with the status of a “republic.” On March 17, the Supreme Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea declared the “independence of Crimea” based on the sham referendum.¹ Russian President Vladimir Putin also recognized Crimea’s “independence” on the same day.² On March 18, an agreement was signed in the Kremlin between Russia and the self-proclaimed Republic of Crimea on the accession of Crimea to the Russian Federation.³

Processes similar to Crimea are developing in the occupied regions of Donetsk and Luhansk whose “independence” has already been recognized by Moscow. It should be noted that the joining of the so-called “people’s republics” of Donetsk and Lugansk into the Russian Federation has been discussed for a long time in Russian political and propaganda circles. However, after the annexation of Crimea, Putin was not in a hurry to recognize Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states and to hold referendums there. Only after eight years, this issue has been activated on the Kremlin agenda.

The issue of accession of the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk to the Russian Federation was surprisingly raised on February 21, 2022 at the meeting of the Russian Security Council when the Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, Sergey Naryshkin, inadvertently said that he supports “the unification of the Donetsk and

Luhansk People's Republics within Russia." Then Vladimir Putin interrupted Naryshkin and pointed out that this issue was not discussed at the current meeting after which Naryshkin corrected his words and expressed his support for the initiative to recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics."

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the separatist de facto leadership of Donetsk and Luhansk announced that they plan to hold referendums on joining Russia but only after "the process of liberating territories is completed."

The Kremlin will most likely adapt the above-mentioned "template" of the occupation policy to the military-civilian administrations of the newly annexed Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. As Igor Kastukevich, Russian State Duma Deputy said: "The inclusion of the Kherson region into Russia will be "full-fledged" by analogy with Crimea."⁴ It is expected that the occupying forces will declare these territories "independent" on the basis of the planned sham referendums and then demand to join Russia. Russian legislation considers the procedure of joining a new subject only through an agreement with a "foreign state;" therefore, recognizing the occupied territory as an "independent state" is a key moment. According to the Russian Constitution, the inclusion of a foreign state in the Russian Federation as a new subject is possible by mutual agreement of the Russian Federation and this foreign state in accordance with the international (interstate) agreement.⁵ Moreover, the initiator of the proposal to join the Russian Federation must be an interested "foreign state" according to Russian legislation.⁶ Since the Russian legislation has not yet been changed, the procedure for joining the occupied territories of Ukraine cannot be violated - the mentioned military-civilian administrations must first be declared "independent," then recognized by Russia and then process of joining with Russia will start later.

Because the control of these regions by the Russian military forces is quite fragile and unstable, Putin is in a hurry to make their illegal "legitimization" as fast as possible. Moreover, this process should be completed before the military aid to Ukraine from the West is further strengthened; in particular, before the "Lend-Lease" program signed with the USA is launched.

It should be noted that the Kremlin miscalculated the plan to seize the southern regions of Ukraine from the start. Moscow expected to quickly

occupy the entire Donbas region and the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia districts and hold referendums during the summer but the Russian army was unable to complete the task and the scheduled date of the sham referendums was postponed to September 11. After the start of Ukraine's counteroffensive operation, the separatists were forced to once again postpone the date of the referendums, with the slogan "Together with Russia," due to security risks. On September 19, it was announced that September 23-27 was set as the date for the "immediate" holding of referendums in the occupied territories of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

Who is responsible for the integration of the occupied territories?

Back in April, the Kremlin appointed a Putin confidant, Sergey Kiriyyenko, the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia, as a curator of the occupied territories of Ukraine. He is a frequent visitor to the southern regions of Ukraine and supervises the implementation of the Russian occupation policy. During his visits to Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, Kiriyyenko consistently sounded the main message that they should prepare to join Russia.

Sergey Kiriyyenko is one of the outstanding figures at the Kremlin to whom Vladimir Putin entrusted the responsible mission of integrating the occupied territories with Russia. Kiriyyenko belongs to the elite of technocrats who have a specific political mission and who are the main pillar of Putin's regime. Many technocrats from this circle started their careers during Boris Yeltsin's presidency but they achieved serious success under Putin's presidency. Kiriyyenko, like other technocrats, initially, was not included in Putin's closest circle but he earned the special trust of the president in a specific situation. For Kiriyyenko, this moment turned out to be the war with Ukraine when he successfully managed to get closer to President Putin and expand his power.⁷ It should be noted that Sergey Kiriyyenko is more often named as one of the most realistic candidates in the list of Putin's "successors."

Kiriyyenko's career began in the 1990s when he first took the post of Deputy Minister of Oil and Energy of Russia and then Minister. In 1998, he held the post of Prime Minister for several months during Boris Yeltsin's presidency. Since 2005, he has been the head of the state corporation Rosatom and the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia since 2016.

Before the start of the war with Ukraine, Kiriienko's area of responsibility was defined by domestic-political issues (parliamentary and presidential elections, parties, ratings, youth movements, etc.). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he was entrusted with the supervision of both the "people's republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk as well as the captured regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia and ensuring their integration with Russia.

The leading role of Kiriienko in holding sham referendums was also discussed in the US State Department where it was assumed that Russia may organize fake referendums in occupied territories of Ukraine which Kiriienko will directly lead.⁸ Assigning this role to Kiriienko is an indication that Putin already considers the occupied lands of Ukraine as Russia's property and its "internal affair."

Creation of pro-Russian administrations

The Kremlin started to incorporate the occupied lands of Ukraine with Russia even without holding pseudo-referendums. The full efforts of the occupying forces were directed to the instillation of the Russian management system and the creation of illegitimate administrative structures. Unlike Donbas, in the newly occupied Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, anti-Russian sentiments are quite strong and the extent of voluntary cooperation with the Russian occupiers is relatively low. The local pro-Russian political forces cannot convince the public to accept "new authorities" and, at the same time, they do not enjoy public trust and respect. Accordingly, Russian military personnel and representatives of special services play an important role in local governance activities.

Taking into account the contradictory stance of the population, it is difficult for Moscow to select reliable local staff which is why the civil servants have to be sent from Russia to the so-called military-civilian administrative units. After the capture of the Kherson region, Sergei Eliseev, a former employee of the Russian Federal Security Service, was appointed as the pro-Russian "head of the government cabinet" and Russian high-ranking officials were appointed as his deputies.⁹ Similarly, the management team of the military-civilian administration of the Zaporizhzhia region is staffed with Russian civil servants and pro-Russian collaborationists.

It should be noted that the "vertical of power" has not yet been fully established in the military-civilian administrations at the level of districts and cities (below regional centers) which complicates the situation for

the occupiers. The Russian occupation is also hindered by the activity of local subversive groups which periodically destroy Russia's military infrastructure.

Control of local population

In July, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia sent officers to the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions to create "temporary divisions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation." They were assigned to support local police units subordinate to the military-civilian administrations. The staff of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia is directly involved in the protection of public order and the "combat against manifestations of extremism."¹⁰ Russian special services identify people with anti-Russian views and carry out strict control. Those who refuse to cooperate with Russia are blocked from accessing financial aid, prevented from obtaining jobs, imprisoned for alleged participation in war crimes and even deported.

Deportation of Ukrainians

On July 15, the military-civilian administrations of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia issued "decrees" to punish "extremist actions" with forced deportation. The decision, which has to be implemented within 24 hours, is made by the Russian military commander. Under "extremist actions" they mean: obstructing the work of the military-civilian administration, discrediting the authorities and armed forces of the Russian Federation, organizing public meetings without the permission of the military-civilian administrations, publishing extremist materials, etc.¹¹

Deportation of the local population from the occupied territories of Ukraine to Russia is also taking place under the guise of humanitarian measures. Deportees from the so-called "filtration camps" are sent to 9,500 points of a temporary residence located in 48 regions (the main resettlement destinations include inland regions such as Buryatia, Zabaykalsky Krai, Primorsky Krai, Khabarovsk Krai, etc.). According to unofficial information, the deportee is allowed to return home only if he signs a declaration that he will comply with the rules which Russia has introduced there.¹²

According to the Ukrainian side, more than 1.2 million people, including more than 200,000 children, were deported from the occupied territories after the Russian invasion of the country. According to Russian statistics, more than 1.55 million people "arrived" in Russia from Ukraine after February 24, 2022. Forced deportation serves to resettle people with pro-

Ukrainian views on the territory of Russia which makes it easier to control them while at the same time helping to prevent the spreading anti-Russian sentiments in the occupied regions. This process also serves to increase the potential of the labor force in Russia and improve demographic indicators.

On May 30, 2022, Vladimir Putin signed a decree simplifying the procedure for obtaining Russian citizenship for Ukrainian orphans or children left without parental care.¹³ This facilitated to grant of Russian citizenship to Ukrainian orphans and significantly accelerated the process of adopting Ukrainian children by potential Russian caregivers.

Passportisation

Another step towards annexation is to speed up the Russian passporting process and simplify the procedure for granting Russian citizenship to those living in the occupied territories. Local residents are forced to get Russian citizenship as quickly as possible under the pretext of receiving Russian social benefits. In May 2022, by decree of Vladimir Putin, the procedures for obtaining Russian citizenship were simplified for residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions as well as the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions. According to Vladimir Putin's decree of July 11, all citizens of Ukraine were given the right to apply for admission to the citizenship of the Russian Federation in a simplified manner.¹⁴ It should be noted that 860,000 people had already received Russian passports in the so-called "People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk" before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

On June 11, Russia opened several civil registry offices in the newly occupied regions of Ukraine in order to speed up the passporting process. However, the number of applicants for Russian passports did not turn out to be large despite the financial incentives that accompany passporting. Russian occupiers are offering 10,000 rubles (\$165) to anyone who wants a Russian passport, regardless of age. According to available data, 30,000 Russian passport applicants were registered in the Zaporizhzhia region¹⁵ and 12,000 in the Kherson region by August 15.¹⁶

In addition, the State Auto Inspectorate of Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs started issuing Russian driver's licenses and vehicle plates in occupied Ukraine regions. Russian passport holders are given Russian driver's licenses and vehicle plates without any problems while others are issued only temporary documents without any Ukrainian markings. After

the temporary authorization expires, local drivers will be forced to receive needed Russian documents.¹⁷

Introduction of the Russian education system

In the annexed regions of Ukraine, great importance is given to the reorganization of the education system on a pro-Russian model. Ukrainian teachers were given a choice either to refuse the Ukrainian school curriculum or to leave their jobs and places of residence. In Moscow, a new school program has been developed for local Ukrainian educational institutions which serves to popularize Russia's historical policy. The authors of the program are promoting an anti-fascist viewpoint and emphasizing the "fascist" nature of the current government in Kyiv. They are also stressing the fact that the currently occupied territories used to belong to the Russian Empire (the Kherson and Taurida governorates). Besides that, in order to improve the "quality of education," selected Russian universities will take over supervision of the universities located in the occupied territories of the Donbas.

Reconstruction plan

The Russian occupation measures also refer to the post-war reconstruction plans of the occupied territories. According to the estimates of the representatives of the budget committee of the Russian State Duma, about 1.5 trillion rubles (\$24 billion) will be needed to restore these areas and these funds will be covered by the state budget and private investments.

In late May 2022, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnulin announced that the government had created a special task force to work on a plan to restore "liberated Ukrainian territories." As for the "patronage" system developed by Sergey Kiriyyenko, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia, the regions of Russia will be involved in the reconstruction of the southeastern regions and municipalities of Ukraine.¹⁸ The "Patronage" system will involve providing financial assistance for the restoration of occupied Ukrainian cities as well as the appointment of regional and municipal-level Russian officials to relevant positions in Donbas. According to the plan, for example, Moscow will restore the Telmanovsky and Novoazovsky districts of the "Donetsk People's Republic," St. Petersburg - Mariupol, etc. The purpose of this project is to create a wide expectation that the Russian Federation will fully engage in the post-war reconstruction of the so-called "liberated territories."

Other measures of Russification Policy

The other Russification measures of the occupied territories of Ukraine also include the creation of a “ruble zone” and the withdrawal of the Ukrainian hryvnia from circulation, the establishment of Moscow time, seizing the information space and the introduction of Russian telecommunication services, the replacement of the Ukrainian dialing code with the Russian code (+7). Ukrainian names and signs are being removed from the public space and replaced with Russian ones.

Conclusion

The main characteristics of Russia’s occupation policy are similar to almost all the territories it has occupied so far. Accordingly, observing the processes allows us to assume that Russia is planning to repeat the “Crimea scenario” with the occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

Drawing parallels with the occupied territories of Georgia, it is easily noticeable that the steps taken by the Kremlin in the occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions are identical to those of Ukraine. The template path of Russian annexation - occupation of the territory as a result of hostilities, the appointment of a pro-Russian government on the captured lands, recognition of the independence of the self-proclaimed republics - Georgia has already passed through on the both occupied territories. The only step remaining is to hold a sham referendum about joining Russia which was largely discussed in recent months. Against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine, they were also preparing to hold a referendum in the occupied Tskhinvali region in the summer of 2022 but the scheduled date was cancelled. It seems that Moscow is leaving this issue open for now, although it is expected that it will use it as a subject of political bargaining and put pressure on the Georgian authorities.

Half a year after the start of the war against Ukraine, some military experts point out that Russia is running out of the military and financial resources to implement Putin’s ambitious geopolitical plans. However, it seems that the Kremlin does not want to hear rational arguments. Having seized the southeastern part of Ukraine, Russia is trying to represent the “special military operation” as successful and wants to show that Moscow is taking care of the pro-Russian population “oppressed” by the Kyiv authorities. Putin develops a narrative that he is charged with a “historic mission -

the process of reunification of Russian lands” and, as he claims, “Ukraine never had statehood before the formation of the Soviet Union.”¹⁹ The annexation of Crimea was preceded by a broad ideological campaign but now President Putin is trying to simply quickly collect the lands of the former Soviet Union.

It is expected that the illegal incorporation of the occupied territories of Ukraine to Russia will limit the prospects for regaining them through peace negotiations because the Kremlin will consider them as a de iure part of Russia’s territory.

On the other hand, the Ukrainian authorities exclude any possibilities of negotiations with Moscow if the Russian Federation holds sham referendums on the occupied territories of Ukraine. And finally, the future borders of the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories will be determined by the outcomes of the war.

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