

What Happens After the Donbass Elections? Unprecedented People's Support for Donetsk and Lugansk Sovereignty

An interview with Russia's UN Representative and Lugansk People's Republic's Foreign Ministry detailing what's ahead and what this means for the Minsk Agreements.

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On November 11, 2018, I was in Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) as an election observer for the national election along with people from twenty-two countries. The elections in Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics (DNR) were necessary because of the assassination of DNR's Head of the Administration **Alexandr Zakharchenko** and the resignation of LNR's former Head of the Administration **Igor Plotnitsky**.

In the run up to the election and in its aftermath, I was able to interview several officials from the Russian Federation and Lugansk People's Republic. I took statements from the Deputy Foreign Minister in LNR, an OSCE election observer who was on his way to monitor the US mid-terms, and the mayor of Stakhanov which is a city in LNR.

The real questions revolve around what the elections mean to each party in the scope of their work? And how will this affect the Minsk peace negotiations?

The elections themselves had the power to make or break the new republics. If the turnout had been low, it would have meant that people voted no confidence in the young states and would have signaled they were failing.

Instead, the voter turnout was among the highest recorded anywhere in recent memory. Lugansk People's Republic had a 77% voter turnout and DNR came in with 80%.

Instead of the election outcome being determined by the results, this election is getting parsed by commas and period placement. While no one is actually arguing whether the election was legal or not, Ukraine is arguing its legitimacy, ie, it may be legal but it's not right to do.

Ukraine and LDNR (Lugansk and Donetsk Republics) only have one mechanism to communicate and negotiate. The result of that is what the Minsk agreements embody. Minsk II makes reference to elections agreed to by all parties.

Ukraine has the right to regulate local elections in LDNR. This gives the Ukrainian government control over how city and town elections are run inside Lugansk and Donetsk Republics. Ukraine decides what determines a legitimate election (procedure and methodology) and what's not legal according to Ukrainian law.

Notice the parsing between legitimate (authentic) and legal or according to Ukrainian law. This parsing represents the arguments made about the election.

The principle involved is the same as a government assuming a power because it isn't forbidden in the Constitution. This is done all the time and is considered normal. It's also why restrictions are placed on government powers in democratic societies.

Since the Minsk Agreements don't specify for Ukraine to regulate the national elections, LDNR rightfully assumed the authority to do so. This is against the backdrop of DNR Head Zakharchenko's assassins admitting they were working for Ukraine.

What does that mean going forward? Well, for international bodies that election and everything resulting from it will mean different things depending on what their mandate is.

I was able to put these questions to an OSCE Election Observer on his way to monitor the US midterm elections. This is what he could say:

"The OSCE can only observe an election if it is invited to do so by an OSCE participating State, so any statements from the OSCE would not comment on any procedural aspects of the elections. The OSCE only observes elections when they are invited by the internationally recognized government, which in this case would be the authorities in Kyiv, and since the Ukrainian government denounces the Donbas elections as illegitimate, it is not inviting the OSCE to observe. Therefore the OSCE will not be monitoring and will not comment on the procedural aspects."

As you can see, it isn't legality that is questioned. It's legitimacy because Kiev questions it. They didn't cover the point in negotiations with LDNR. It's procedure, or how the election will be done which is administrative detail. And lastly, it is the lack of an internationally recognized government invitation.

This is important because the same principals apply when I interviewed Russia's First Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, **Dimitry Polanskiy** and LNR's Foreign Minister **Vladislav Danego**.

George Eliason: Ambassador Polanskiy, I would like to have a statement from you about Russia's official attitude toward what kind of status change this (the election) brings to LDNR? Second, do you see this as a step to (LDNR) normalizing relations with Russia? IE recognition?

Russian UN Deputy Rep Polanski: "Hello once again. I will try to explain our position to you. The leaders of some districts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions were elected on November 11 of this year. The current leaders – Denis Pushilin (Donetsk) and Leonid Pasechnik – were elected to the top positions. The voter turnout was unprecedentedly high – almost 80 percent.

The elections were organized under the universal and equal right to vote as guaranteed by item 7.3 of the 1990 Copenhagen Document of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and by the basic standards of democracy.

The Kiev authorities do not want to hear this, but we will tell them about the unanimous opinion of the many observers from over 20 countries, including OSCE member states. On the whole, voting took place in a calm atmosphere

and without violations. The absence of excesses was reaffirmed by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM). Its personnel did not act as observers at these elections but continued monitoring the situation in the unrecognized republics under their mandate.

Now I would like to say a few words about motives. After the assassination of Alexander Zakharchenko, the potential “vacuum of power” created a real risk of total destabilization in southeastern Ukraine. This could have negatively affected the sustenance of life in Donbass and the process of settlement in general against the backdrop of the Kiev-imposed trade and economic blockade and Kiev’s continuous threats to use force.

The elections made it possible to avoid this scenario. Now the people’s elected officials have a mandate to address the practical goals of supporting a normal life in these regions and carrying out the social functions that have been stubbornly neglected by the Ukrainian authorities. It is essential to approach the results of the election in Donbass with understanding, respect, and consideration for the totality of all factors.

We assume that it was held outside the context of the Minsk Package of Measures, item 12 of which is exclusively devoted to local elections. We hope the newly elected leaders of Donetsk and Lugansk will continue the dialogue with Kiev in the framework of the Contact Group on settling the crisis in southeastern Ukraine in accordance with the Minsk agreements.

For the second question, we are open for normalization with Ukraine, all the contrary initiatives come from Kiev, not from us. Ukraine has become an “Anti-Russia” from the point of view of its foreign policy.

Instead of looking for alleged Russian aggression and blaming everything on my country Ukraine should better try to find the way to win back the trust of its citizens – those who live in the East and in the South. There is no other way to peace for Kiev but through dialogue with Donbass!

To answer your question about recognition. We do not intend to recognize these two republics, and the elections change nothing in this regard. They create no new status. Previous ones were held 4 yrs ago. According to Minsk agreements someday they will return to Ukraine.

But Kiev needs to implement Minsk agreements for this, create conditions for residents of Donbass to feel at home, speak Russian language and teach their children in it as well as respect their historic figures who fought for the liberation of Ukraine from Nazi Germany. So far it is not being done.”

Russia’s First Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Polanski makes it clear that Russia’s position while supportive, remains within its agreements and international norms regarding LDNR.

Ukraine, on the other hand, has been ramping up the rhetoric and bringing in the machinery of war to the front lines as it continues to shell peaceful civilian homes and apartments. Kiev is now threatening a Blitzkrieg war in a region Ukrainian nationalists assisted Germany with its Blitzkrieg war in WWII.

LNR FM Vladislav Danego on what the results mean going forward

The morning after the election I was lucky enough to catch (LNR)Lugansk People’s Republic Foreign Minister Vladislav Danego in the hotel lobby and he graciously agreed to an

interview.

George Eliason: I'm with LNR's (Lugansk People's Republic) Foreign Minister Danego. It's the day after the election and they have a mandate, 77% of voters able to vote; voted.

Foreign Minister Danego, how do you see negotiations, peace negotiations going with Ukraine from this point forward?

LNR Foreign Minister Vladislav Danego: "The result that was shown yesterday, that level of political awareness and desire (aspiration) that people showed with 77% participation (in the election) said that the world needs to respect (honor) the people's choice and that would also include Ukraine.

Donbass clearly said, "We are for the republic." In LNR and DNR it's absolutely unprecedented (electoral) participation. That level of voter participation is rarely seen anywhere.

In this situation, we will force Ukraine to accept the opinion (choice) of Donbass. And in the talks, first of all, and most of all, it will complicate the talks because Ukraine categorically refuses to hear the people of Donbass. But I hope the international community will make Ukraine open their eyes, and open their ears, and hear what Donbass is saying.

Only under those conditions will there be the possibility of at least some progress in dialogue with Ukraine. If Ukraine will continue pretending they cannot see or hear Donbass, then accordingly, we will make our decision on whether it's feasible to try and negotiate with such a country. Or will we need to wait until the government in Ukraine becomes the kind that is willing to talk and negotiate?

And that's why we had elections because we now have two republics where there are governments acting for the interests of the people who live in Donbass and have to periodically check for the approval of the people.

Right now, first and foremost, people showed their patriotism and responsibility toward their country. The results will be announced shortly. Preliminary results show that interim Head of the Republic Pasichnik is ahead and also results for members of the People's Council.

People showed a high level of trust in the current leadership of the republic. They showed their desire to move forward. They showed they want to build peaceful lives and count on the help of the Russian Federation. They showed this clearly at the end of the day of the election."

Every one of Foreign Minister Danego's statements is in line with international law and the agreements Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) has with Kiev.

FM Danego isn't saying Kiev has to deal with LNR in a different way. He made it clear the people have decided who is representing them at the negotiating table and who is leading them into the future today. The one other thing is Kiev has to start respecting the agreements they are party to.

LNR DFM Anna Soroka on reasons why this election is important

We went to the commemoration at the We will not forgive! We will not forget! Memorial with

LNR Deputy Foreign Minister Anna Soroka. For her, this was why the 2018 election was important. The following is the text of what she had to say.

LNR Deputy Foreign Minister Anna Soroka: “This place is where the soul of Lugansk People’s Republic lays. In this place, some of the citizens of Lugansk were killed during the military actions of the summer of 2014. I am the Deputy Foreign Minister of Lugansk People’s Republic. My name is Anna. I, personally was a participant and took part in the events that happened in 2014.

Right now, we’re at the memorial for the burial of the victims. It’s called “Never forget, Never forgive!” Here lies up to 800 citizens of the republic. One hundred nineteen we know the names of. The rest are unknown to us.

I will explain how / why this happened. Aberonnaya Street divides the city (Lugansk) into two parts and it has importance in two wars, the first and the second world wars. As it happened this street historically divides our city into two parts.

The memorial for victims of nineteen forty-two, nineteen forty-three (behind her in the video) is for up to twenty-five thousand war victims of Voroshelovgrad (Lugansk) tortured by the Nazi army and this place where we stand now, the memorial “We don’t forget, we don’t forgive!” is for the victims of Ukrainian aggression of 2014 (to her left in the video).

This is the one place that doesn’t need (more)proof of the guilt of the Ukrainian army of the Kiev regime that unlawfully came to power in February 2014. It, by itself, is the witness that in peaceful normal conditions this kind of mass grave has no place. It cannot happen.

In the summer of 2014, when Lugansk was without lights and water, from the airport and all sides of the surrounding territory (Lugansk) was occupied by Ukraine, mortars were flying from the territory occupied by Ukraine. Civilians were dying everywhere, all over the city, even in the center of Lugansk.

The city was not able to keep up with all the bodies that were coming in because there was no electricity and not enough generators. All four cemeteries of Lugansk were under fire by the Ukrainian army. The decision was made to bury people here. If you can imagine the situation, this was the frontline (points in the middle distance). The airport which was four kilometers from here was under the control of the Ukrainian army. They attacked from there.

It was very difficult to bury people here as well (because it was also under fire). People dug trenches and as we said before (most of those who died) is unknown. We are now working on Identifying the rest of the people buried here.

I don’t want to paint this horrific picture if you could imagine for a minute, no lights, no water, explosions every minute, shells exploding overhead, bodies without heads, legs, or arms. It was very scary, horrific. We didn’t know who they were. That’s why there are so many unknown.

And we want very much for the world to know about the fact this place exists. This precise place is a direct witness to the crimes of Ukraine against our people. And today, when we stand before the choice that we have to make at our election, we would like to know that the world will hear us and understand us.

And understand we are not just trying to show our willfulness (contrariness). We fight for our lives, for peace. We fight for them (points to the mass grave) because we are responsible before them. I propose a moment of silence for all those who have died.”

The following is an interview with Sergey Schevlakov, the Mayor of Stakhanov about why the election is important to Donbass.

Mayor Sergey Schevlakov: “The Ukrainian government started this. None of us, not I, not you wanted to start this war. We didn’t go to Lviv or somewhere else in Western Ukraine to tell them how to run things. We were all friendly, all friends. Our families were friends. It’s them that came to kill us.

It is them that is tearing the country (Ukraine) apart. So, it’s understood the government of Ukraine has different goals. For example, a long time ago in 12th century Great Rus, when it was torn apart into little kingdoms and history is repeating itself.

It happened in the 16th century. It’s repeating again today. Everyone wants to be a little king separating into little kingdoms. Instead of uniting, they tried to be great themselves.”

George Eliason: Will the Moscow Patriarchate be able to mend the breach in Ukrainian Orthodoxy?

Mayor Sergey Schevlakov: “ Let me put it this way, we had one great powerful country. The world had competition. To have someone lose you have to impoverish (bankrupt) them spiritually and economically.

So, the European countries coalition tore apart the Soviet Union and now they are doing it to everything else including Ukraine. The goal is to push away a part of Russiya (greater Russia) that had Ukraine and Belarus together. It used to be one body or one country, they are consciously separating Ukraine and Russiya, pushing them away from each other so they could never unite again.

For a thousand years, Ukraine and Russia were one country and one people. For them not to unite and show that they are different, is why they are consciously forcing the Ukrainian language and won’t have Russian. Although we have one language, they are forcing the concept that we are different people and a different country.

And now to separate us spiritually, they are setting up the Ukrainian Prava Slava (Orthodox Church) so they want to be separate from the Russian Orthodox Church.

To divide the church into parts is to separate part of the people that live in Ukraine. On their own, the western countries and institutes created the separation to divide us so that we could never join again so that we could never become strong again.

So that we will always be poor and miserable. So that we crawl on our hands and knees before those that give welfare handouts or that we have to go to their countries to work on their plantations.

To make us the 21st-century slaves.

In other words, instead of building equality between countries, between different nations and peoples there should be respect and equality to build peaceful and good relationships between countries. But today, unfortunately, a different road is chosen. War, destruction, poverty, sorrow, tears, and so on;

We don't want this.

We want peace and normal relationships politically, economically, and spiritually. That is why we are against the separation and division in the Church as well.

So, to summarize; we are former Soviet countries, meaning we are one people really. But in Soviet times the Germanies after WWII were separated in two countries. Russia did not fan the flames of division between the two Germanies. Was there a war between the two Germanies? No.

The Soviet Union left everything in Germany (didn't rob the country) and took the Soviet army out. They allowed the two Germanies to come together without any conflict. But why then is the same Germany that was allowed to unite, the first to interfere in our union?

Instead, they're causing us to divide instead of uniting so that we are left hungry and without work. That's why I have this question. How is this a democratic Europe? Just saying, for example."

Since the election, Ukraine has declared a state of war. They have moved S-300 surface to air missiles into the Donbass conflict zone. Olexandr Turchinov wants to use Blitzkrieg operations which he says will subdue LDNR in one week.

Russia is taking the threat very seriously this time. This is the result of the election on Ukraine's side. Especially since there is a mandate for the newly elected leaders to continue moving in the direction they are going, Ukraine wants to destroy the new republics, not reintegrate them.

The world community needs to take these threats seriously. The people of the region have suffered enough. If the conflict in Donbass widens at all, ie starts to involve Russian military, it will likely engulf the entire region as well.

In the meantime we get a clear window into the democracy Ukraine is proposing, not just for Donbass, but for the rest of Ukraine that is already under Poroshenko's wing. It is penury, perpetual escalation, and war for the sake of a comma and the placement of a period.

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George Eliason is an independent journalist based in Donbass. All videos in this article are by Olga Eliason

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