

Russia's approach to civilians in the territories it controls

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Question

What has the Russian approach been to civilians in areas it controls, either directly or through proxies?

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1. Overview

This rapid review synthesises the literature from academic sources, knowledge institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and trusted independent media outlets on the approach used by the Russian government to provide any support or services to civilians in the territories it controls. The rapid review concludes that Russia provides economic, social, government, and military support to de facto states that it controls, such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and the Donbas region. Russia covers large parts of the state's budget of these separatist regions; pays the salaries to civil servants; pays most of the pensions; provides gas subsidies; invests heavily in infrastructure and buildings; makes it easy to obtain the Russian citizenship for the people who live in these regions; and gives easy access to scholarships in Russia and promotes the Russian language through cultural exchange.

This review uses the term aid referring to a wide range of support, such as humanitarian, social safety nets, basic services, infrastructure, state development, and security. Due to the lack of transparency on the Russian aid money that flows into the regions that are the subject of this review, it is impossible to show disaggregated data, but rather a broader overview of Russian aid to these regions.

Most of the time, Russia used humanitarian aid and assistance to provide for the civilians in these regions. During armed conflict it provided, to some extent, food and medicines to the people. However, from the literature it is clear that Russia has used humanitarian aid and assistance mainly as an instrument to pursue broader policy goals that could not be defined as humanitarian in nature. Russia often relied on the language of humanitarianism to strengthen its credentials as a neutral and impartial actor, for example in Georgian and Moldovan context and to justify its continued support for the residents and de facto authorities of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, notwithstanding the Georgian and Moldovan protests against its continued involvement, to secure its aim to strengthen the political and social ties with these regions while weakening their allegiance to Georgia and Moldova. The claim of “neutrality”, however, is no longer at play now Russia has invaded Ukraine and started the war with Ukraine in February 2022.

Russia's funding into de facto states is off the state budget, and therefore lacking any transparency. As the humanitarian activities to the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine demonstrate, the Russian state is not willing to allow scrutiny of their humanitarian aid by independent organisations. Mistrust, corruption, and the use of aid for propaganda, even smuggling arms into the separatist region, are commonly mentioned by trusted sources. After a conflict becomes more stabilised, Russia's humanitarian aid becomes more of a long-term strategic “friendship”, often sealed in a treaty to integrate the region into the Russian sphere, such as the cases of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria clearly show. Although all these separatist regions rely on Russia (economically, politically, and through Russia's military presence), this does not mean that they always do exactly what Russia wants, which is particularly the case for Abkhazia and Transnistria.

2. The humanitarian situation in Russian-held areas in southern Ukraine during the Russia-Ukraine war

Russian troops currently occupy and control several cities and municipalities in southern Ukraine, such as Berdyansk, Kherson and Melitopol, after they were taken by force since the launch of a

full-scale invasion by Russia on 24 February 2022. Few reports have come out from these regions as much attention concentrates on the continuing atrocities of the war in other parts of Ukraine. Some independent sources mention that one of the first things the Russian occupying forces did when they had control over a city, was to target the local government officials to cooperate with them. In Melitopol, the mayor was reportedly kidnapped by Russian soldiers and replaced by a pro-Russian local councillor.¹ Although this is not the case in all cities, it shows that local governments loyal to Ukraine and fiercely resisting Russian occupation will not be accepted.

The Russians need the local authorities to keep public services running. To cite a Financial Times article: “The Russians take little interest in the operation of hospitals and schools, preferring to outsource that to locals”.² Attempts have been made to declare the “Kherson People’s Republic” as a breakaway region, like in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine after 2014 when separatists took control over local authorities and declared the “Donetsk People’s Republic” and the “Luhansk People’s Republic”. But in southern Ukraine this was met with mass protests and resisted by regional and local councils.

Citizens are cut off from news from Ukrainian media outlets and replaced by pro-Russian propaganda, giving occupied forces control over what information get transmitted on television and radio.³ There are reports of intimidation and violence against local Ukraine journalists that try to continue to publish independently, for example through social media.⁴ Russian soldiers have set up checkpoints in the region, preventing people from leaving and controlling all goods that go in and out of the cities. The region has been cut off from Kyiv and people can only safely move to the Crimea that was annexed by Russia in 2014.⁵ Official humanitarian corridors to let people out who want to leave and to bring in food and medicines have not been agreed yet. With food and medicine supplies dwindling, the Russians have moved some ways into providing humanitarian aid, although there are reports of Russian forces giving out food and medicines mainly for propaganda. In many occupied cities, citizens go to the streets to protest against the Russian occupation. With some reports claiming that Russian authorities threaten to cut off water and electricity if more protests take place.⁶

¹ ‘We’re living a nightmare’: life in Russian-occupied southern Ukraine. *The Guardian* (14 March 2022).

² ‘Life under occupation: How Ukrainians are resisting Russian rule’. *The Financial Times* (16 March 2022). <https://www.ft.com/content/57a316b2-0bfd-463c-a26e-3ca291e9e04b>

³ ‘Some in Ukraine’s Russian-occupied southern cities take to the streets in show of defiance’. *NBC News* (13 March 2022) <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/ukraines-russian-occupied-southern-cities-take-streets-show-defiance-rcna19171>

⁴ ‘Life under occupation: How Ukrainians are resisting Russian rule’. *The Financial Times* (16 March 2022). <https://www.ft.com/content/57a316b2-0bfd-463c-a26e-3ca291e9e04b>

⁵ ‘Some in Ukraine’s Russian-occupied southern cities take to the streets in show of defiance’. *NBC News* (13 March 2022) <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/ukraines-russian-occupied-southern-cities-take-streets-show-defiance-rcna19171>

⁶ ‘We’re living a nightmare’: life in Russian-occupied southern Ukraine. *The Guardian* (14 March 2022).

A lot remains uncertain about what will happen next in Russian occupied cities in Ukraine. Some indications what might happen could come from experiences from Russian controlled regions elsewhere.

3. Russia's approach to civilians in the separatist Donbas region before the Russian invasion of Ukraine

Rácz and Moshes (2014) mention that after failed attempts by the Russian authorities to push for a federalisation of the Ukrainian state after the revolution that took out former president and pro-Russia ally Viktor Yanukovich, Moscow shifted towards a strategy of “frozen conflict”.⁷ What this means is that Russia supported the establishment of a non-recognised entity in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine (Bowen, 2017).

In the occupied territories (by Russian proxies) the Ukraine state administration was quickly replaced by “new, de facto authorities, exercising their power with the active political, diplomatic, military and media support of Russia” (Rácz and Moshes, 2014: 6). Referenda on independence were quickly organised by the separatist authorities in Donetsk and Luhansk to legitimise the control over the region. Since 2014, Russian state propaganda has consistently promoted the separatist “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic” as legitimate political actors (De Waal, 2018). Russian President Vladimir Putin called for the statehood of Eastern Ukrainian regions, which he called Novorossiia.

According to Scrinic (2014), civilians in the Donbas region have suffered under the new regime as they face a lack of resources and proper living conditions, robberies and violence organised by pro-Russian volunteers.⁸ More than 3.5 million people in eastern Ukraine are in need of aid, according to UN figures (cited by Arutunyan, 2019). The aging segment of eastern Ukraine’s population is hardest-hit of all, struggling to get by on pensions paid by Russia as low as US\$30 per month (Arutunyan, 2019). The Kyiv government has been blamed persistently for the humanitarian catastrophe by Russian propaganda. The reality is that “the secessionist republics are conflict zones where political elites depend on the continuous presence of the Russian military and on Russian “humanitarian aid” for their economic security and survival” (Dunn and Bobick, 2014 – cited in Scrinic 2014: 82).

It is true that humanitarian aid from the west is blocked by the separatists, but also by heavy constraints that were put in place because of the economic blockade of the separatist region by the Ukraine government in Kyiv. So, the only support civilians receive, comes from Russia. Many humanitarian convoys of trucks sent by the Russian Emergencies Ministry have since crossed the border into eastern Ukraine but without any transparency or scrutiny as independent inspections by the Red Cross, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or UN institutions do not take place.

⁷ Federalisation would have given Russia substantial influence in Kyiv through Russia-backed political parties in eastern Ukraine (the same was proposed in Moldova and rejected by its government – see section about Transnistria).

⁸ This was backed by a reportage of the Wall Street Journal titled [Dismal Russian Record in Occupied Eastern Ukraine Serves as Warning](#) (4 February 2022).

In 2014, an OSCE mission in Ukraine reported “intense movements” of trucks transporting coal and bodies from the Luhansk region to the Russian Federation (cited by Scrinic, 2014). The report mentions that the Russian customs took care that the trucks be empty when they enter Ukraine. The OSCE mission confirmed that, out of the 106 vehicles that arrived in Donetsk, 18 trucks transported fuel, which does not fall under humanitarian aid. There are several witness accounts of ammunition entering the separatist areas through humanitarian convoys (Arutunyan, 2019).

Arutunyan (2019) also mentions that out of frustration with the ineffectiveness of Russian humanitarian aid (not reaching the people most in need in eastern Ukraine), and continued suffering of the people in the Donbas region, Russian private aid groups have stepped in to deliver food and medicines. However, “[a]mid the lack of both coordination and common guidelines, grassroots groups distrust each other as well as Moscow, trading accusations that some workers are merely enriching themselves instead of delivering aid to needy people. This mistrust, the aid worker said, dominates the sector and keeps grassroots groups from getting along” (Arutunyan, 2019: n/a).

Beyond un-coordinated and non-transparent humanitarian aid, Russia provides, to some extent, other things to civilians, which have been summarised by news agency Reuters in 2021.⁹

- Moscow had issued more than 600,000 Russian passports to Donbass residents since President Vladimir Putin signed an order in April 2019 allowing them to apply for citizenship under an expedited procedure.
- Russia directly finances pensions and public sector salaries in eastern Ukraine after Kyiv stopped paying public sector wages and pensions to people registered as living in separatist-controlled areas.¹⁰ Russia claims that it does not bankroll the separatist administrations.¹¹
- Both separatist regions have abandoned the Ukrainian Hryvnia in favour of the Russian Rouble as their official currencies.
- Local schools now follow the Russian national curriculum instead of that taught in Ukraine.
- Russia lifted curbs on exports and imports of goods between Russia and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Russian authorities claim the move was designed to compensate for the economic blockage between those regions and the rest of Ukraine.
- Local authorities in Donetsk said in January 2021 that Russia had begun supplying its Sputnik V vaccine against COVID-19 to rebel-controlled Donetsk despite a ban by Kyiv. However, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which markets the Sputnik vaccine abroad, said it did not supply the Donetsk or Luhansk breakaway regions.

⁹ Factbox: [How rebel-held regions of eastern Ukraine have grown closer to Russia | Reuters](#) (15 December 2021).

¹⁰ Some background on the constraints of receiving a pension in the separatist regions comes from Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group article [Ukraine’s MPs leave Donbas pensioners to keep dying for their pensions](#) (6 February 2020).

¹¹ See also [Moscow is bankrolling Ukraine rebels: ex-separatist official | Reuters](#) (5 October 2016).

De Waal (2018) mentions that Russia spends US\$3 billion annually in the Donbas region, none of it coming from the Russian budget. In 2020, the estimation by the Ukraine government was that Russia spends a total of about US\$1.3 billion annually on salaries alone in separatist-held parts of Ukraine, including Crimea as well as the Donbas region.¹² According to government documents claimed to be obtained in 2021 by the Donbas Realities desk of RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, the Russian government was willing to spend around 900 billion Roubles (US\$12.4 billion) over a three year period on financial support into eastern Ukraine. The planned spending described in the documents appears to represent a significant increase in average salary by bringing it in line with the neighbouring Russian region of Rostov.¹³

4. Russia's approach to civilians in Transnistria (Moldova)

Russia supports the tiny separatist region of Transnistria within Moldova but resist the idea of an independent Transnistria. Russia has over 400 soldiers based in Transnistria under the name of a "peace keeping" force (Miarka, 2020).¹⁴ In 2003, Russia and Transnistria put forward the Kozak Memorandum, which envisaged that Transnistria re-joins Moldova but keeps a Russian military presence and has veto powers on Moldova's future foreign and security policies (De Waal, 2018). Such a special autonomy of Transnistria within the state of Moldova would give the Russia-backed separatists, and with that Russia itself, a *de facto* veto power in important issues of the country. As such, the Moldovan government, after a long process, did not accept the proposal (Rácz and Moshes, 2014).

Russia uses its control in Transnistria to enforce economic ties with the separatist region. Although trade with Russia has reduced in favour of Moldova in recent years (Kermach, 2017), opening up the Russian labour market to citizens of Transnistria has generated significant revenues for the Transnistrian budget. Miarka (2020) mentions that in the period between January to March 2019, most of the volume of private money transfers into the region came from workers in Russia who transferred via electronic systems US\$5 million.

Targeted subsidies and gas subsidies are also an extremely important manifestation of the Russia's financial support for strengthening the state of Transnistria (Miarka, 2020). De Waal (2018) even mentions that Transnistria receives Russian gas for free as Gazprom sends the bill to the Moldovan company MoldovaGaz, which refuses to pay for its breakaway territory. The unpaid bill is now estimated to exceed \$6 billion. Calus (2015) mentions that free natural gas supplies are worth US\$270 million.

Walker (2015) states that it is difficult to verify exact figures, as like in eastern Ukraine, the funds are kept outside the budget, but he refers to sources that estimate that Russia injects around US\$100 million a year into the Transnistrian economy. Most of that money is to provide welfare services as well as to prop up the expenses for Transnistrian armed forces. For example, since

¹² 'Russia Plans To Spend \$12 Billion In Separatist-Held Parts Of Ukraine: Documents' RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (27 September 2021).

¹³ 'Russia Plans To Spend \$12 Billion In Separatist-Held Parts Of Ukraine: Documents' RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (27 September 2021).

¹⁴ "Russian peacekeeper clearly supported the Transnistrian regime in strengthening the military capabilities and created a 'Transnistrian Army' which outnumbers the Moldovan Army" (Munteanu and Munteanu 2007: 51).

2008 the Russian Federation pays out allowances for the pensions of residents in Transnistria (De Waal, 2018). Walker (2015) estimates that this annual donation represents about 70% of the total Transnistrian budget. This financial support “is designed not only to deliver better public services to the population, it is intended to buy Moscow political leverage to shape the breakaway state’s foreign policy direction” (Walker, 2015: n/a).

Part of the money comes from humanitarian aid targeted at health care, such as financing the modernisation of hospital wards and purchase of modern equipment, and education, such as financing the construction and renovation of schools and kindergartens, and printing textbooks (Miarka, 2020). As Miarka (2020) highlights, in this context, the organisation of the Eurasian Initiative in Moscow, which provides a platform for material aid to Transnistria, is important. The organisation started its activity in 2012 with Russian state funds. With those funds it was possible to implement many social projects in Transnistria.

However, since 2015, Russia has reduced direct financial support to Transnistria. De Waal (2018) mentions two reasons. First, this may be because of Russia’s high bills for Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Second, Russia might think that the new leadership of Transnistria of a wealthy business conglomerate named Sheriff can afford to meet some of the social costs of the population. However, as Walker (2015) and De Waal (2018) argue, as control comes with a high price tag for Russia, lowering these costs could move the Transnistrian authorities more towards Moldovan and EU support, as the Transnistrian leaders are still independent from Moscow and have shown that in several occasions.

5. Russia’s approach to civilians in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia)

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a period of conflict broke out in the Caucasus where regions such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia started to claim independence from Georgia. Russian peacekeeping troops were stationed in the two regions. The 2008 war in Georgia concentrated mainly in South Ossetia, where Russian forces fought against Georgian forces. After the five-day war, Russia officially recognised the independence of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian regimes and since have increased their control and influence significantly in the two regions (De Waal, 2018), by signing an “Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support” (Ambrosio & Lange, 2018). In 2014 the two regions signed new treaties which provided for a “coordinated foreign policy” and a “single space of defence and security” of Russia with the respective regions (Gerrits & Bader, 2016). The treaties also made it easier for citizens to obtain Russian citizenship and ensured an increase of average salaries to a level comparable to that in the Southern Federal District of the Russian Federation (Ambrosio & Lange, 2018; Gerrits & Bader, 2016).

Since the war ended in 2008...

Russia has built a number of military bases in the two regions, protects their borders, promotes their international recognition as independent states, restores damaged and builds new infrastructure, covers virtually all of South Ossetia’s and most of Abkhazia’s state budgets and it carries out part of public administration in the two regions. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been effectively turned into Russian dependencies. (Gerrits & Bader, 2016: 298)

The infrastructural development of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is largely delegated to the Russian Ministry of Regional Development, whose official mandate concerns the development of the subjects of the Russian Federation rather than foreign territories (Gerrits & Bader, 2016). Russia also provides direct financial aid to the regions. In 2012, the direct aid was 22% of the Abkhaz budget, which was two years earlier estimated at 60% of the Abkhaz budget. However, by including investments in infrastructure development the Russian subsidy to the Abkhaz budget in 2012 still accounted for approximately 70% of the total budget (Gerrits & Bader, 2016). In South Ossetia, Russia contributes fully to the budget with a calculation that this amounted to one billion dollars including infrastructure development between 2008 and 2013 (Gerrits & Bader, 2016).

On top of these expenditures into the two regions, Russia also provides pension payments for Russian passport holders. With the “passportisation” of the two regions, the large majority of the people have Russian passports, which increases the pension obligations by the Russian Federal State. Gerrits and Bader (2016) highlight two benefits for Russia to issue passports to inhabitants of the two regions: i) it is seen as an effective means to strengthen the loyalty of Abkhazian and South Ossetian citizens to Russia and by extension to weaken their affiliation to Georgia; ii) the issuing of passports has made it possible for Russia to invoke a responsibility-to-protect argument, as it did during the conflict with Georgia in August 2008.

Other linkages that Russia has built with the two regions include promoting educational exchange through scholarships to a significant share of high school graduates from the two regions (Kirova, 2012). Furthermore, Russia actively promotes the Russian language and culture through a range of government agencies and government-organised non-governmental organisations, such as the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Gerrits & Bader, 2016).

Although the two regions seem identical, Abkhazia is on a different route than South Ossetia. As De Waal (2018) explains, the Abkhazia elite is not willing to give too much control to Russia, for example resisting in the treaty of 2014 a provision for Russians to have a fast track to acquire Abkhaz citizenship, which would give them the right to acquire property in Abkhazia—which noncitizens are currently denied. “The fear in Abkhazia is that if Russians are allowed to buy property, then the country’s prime real estate will quickly be snapped up and Russia will become the legal owner of Abkhazia” (De Waal, 2018: 24).

Kolstø (2020: 141) explains that de facto states such as Abkhazia surprisingly and repeatedly are “both willing and able to defy the wishes of their patrons and pursue their own agendas instead”. Abkhazia indeed continues to seek recognition as an independent state (Smith, 2018), although it still needs Russia as patron because only very few countries recognise its independency. On the other hand, South Ossetia is much smaller with a less diverse economy and shrinking population and as such has become more a part of Russia, and even desires to be absorbed within the Russian state (Farniev, 2014; Smith, 2018).

As the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence publication (2019) mentions, it is Russia’s continued supply of so called “humanitarian assistance” in South Ossetia and Abkhazia throughout a long period that pre-dates the 2008 war that set the base for the integration of the two regions into Russian space. For example, in June 2004, it delivered humanitarian aid, consisting of supplies of food and fuel, at the request of the South Ossetian authorities (NATO, 2019). During the August 2008 conflict, Russia increased its humanitarian activities of providing significant quantities of food, water, medications, water purification facilities, diesel power plants,

tents and other material resources. More than 200 rescue workers conducted search and rescue operations in destroyed buildings. When the conflict stabilised, Russia rebuilt destroyed infrastructure and buildings (NATO, 2019). However, the report clearly makes the point that although Russian humanitarian aid was adequate and brought relief to the populations, particularly in South Ossetia, the logic of deploying humanitarian assets was mainly political and served diplomatic ambitions.

Humanitarian assistance thus enabled Russia to create and sustain a narrative of impartiality and preoccupation with civilian protection, reinforcing its claim to be acting in self-defence and in accordance with an international mandate. In short, humanitarianism was a source of legitimacy for Russia and thus a diplomatic and information domain enabler. (NATO, 2019: 220).

Long term, provision of humanitarian aid can potentially render the recipient economically dependent on the party supplying assistance. Gerrits and Bader (2016) indeed show that building economic linkages is an important strategy for Russia. They cite sources that mention that 99% of foreign direct investment come from Russia, although investments by Turkey are on the rise in Abkhazia. This integration is not only in trade and investment, but the regions have adopted Russian technical and commercial standards, and its electricity grid has been united with that of the Russian Federation. In addition, the Russian state company Russian Railways controls the rail network of Abkhazia, and other Russian companies oversee the development of Abkhaz sea infrastructure. Furthermore, state-owned Rosneft, Russia's largest oil company, looks for oil off the Abkhaz coast (Gerrits & Bader, 2016). Russian trade with Abkhazia and South Ossetia is also facilitated by the fact that the regions continue to use the Russian Rouble as their primary currency. However, as Blakkisrud et al. (2021) argue, economic and trade relations do not necessarily increase trust, with Russia increasingly frustrated about Abkhazian authorities seeking self-interests, which recently has reduced economic activities between the region and its patron.

The claim of independence while depending heavily on financial support from Russia is a tight balance for Abkhazia. Rising criminal activities in the region made the Russian authorities propose to set up a huge joint Russian-Abkhazian "Information and Coordination Center to Combat Organized Crime and Other Kinds of Criminality" housing 400 employees. However, the Abkhazian authorities resisted, not because they did not share concerns about the growing lawlessness in Abkhazia – which increasingly targeted Russian middle-class citizens on holiday in the country (Abkhazia is an important holiday destination for Russian families) – but because they perceived it as an attempt to merge the two states' ministries of the interior for practical purposes, reducing the authorities' sovereignty (Kolstø, 2020).

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