

# The Russian Occupation of Ukraine's Southern Regions

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## Summary

After launching its large-scale and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russian troops had taken control over Ukraine's southern regions – the Kherson Oblast and large parts of Zaporizhzhia Oblast – already by early March.

There are several scenarios for how Russia might deal with these newly occupied territories in southern Ukraine. The Kremlin seems to be planning either to use pro-Russian collaborator authorities under its control to create “pro-Russian quasi-states”, following the model of the “People's Republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas, or the Kremlin might consider a speedier annexation of the regions as another option, as it did with Crimea in 2014.

It also cannot be ruled out that Moscow might annex these territories in connection with other Kremlin proxy statelets such as Transnistria (in Moldova) or the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia (in Georgia).

No matter what way Russia chooses to implement its control over Ukraine's regions, the response from international community must be to never accept any fruits of Russian aggression, to demand immediate withdrawal of Russian troops, and re-establish Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

## Introduction

On 25 May 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on simplified admission to Russian citizenship for residents of the occupied territories in Ukraine's south – the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. Putin's new decree amended the text of a document originally issued on 24 April 2019, through which the Russian authorities made it easier for residents of the occupied areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts to obtain Russian citizenship. This new decree added the Kherson Oblast and the occupied areas of Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

This report on the Russian occupation of Ukraine's south particularly focuses on the Kherson Oblast since Russia has occupied it, more or less, in its entirety.

## Background

Since Russia launched its large-scale and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it has had to change its military objectives several times. Having failed to take or surround the capital, Kyiv, Russian forces withdrew completely from northern Ukraine in late March. The Kremlin then shifted most of its focus to the Donets Basin (Donbas) in eastern Ukraine, but it has also been forced to limit its military goals there.

In southern Ukraine, however, the picture has been somewhat different. Russian troops attacking from the illegally annexed Crimean Peninsula quickly captured most of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblast. In the Kherson Oblast, the city of Kherson was surrounded while neighbouring villages and the airport at Chornobaivka were brought under Russian control. Russian troops entered the city on 1 March, and two days later claimed to have conquered the entire territory of Kherson Oblast.

The Kherson Oblast is a strategically important region that controls the outflow of the Dnipro River into the Black Sea and connects the Crimean Peninsula with the rest of Ukraine. Successfully holding the oblast will allow Russia to control the Northern Crimean Canal, which before Russia's annexation of Crimea supplied 85 percent of the peninsula's freshwater needs. Ukraine shut down the canal in 2014, shortly after the annexation, but Russia has now restarted the flow. The region is also an important agricultural centre in Ukraine, where wheat, corn, sunflowers and vegetables are grown. From Kherson, Russia could potentially launch offensives against south-western cities such as Mykolaiv and Odesa, or towards Kryvyi Rih and Dnipro to the north. If Russia could manage to establish control over south-western Ukraine, this would secure a land route to the breakaway region of Transnistria in Moldova. On 22 April, Russian Major General Rustam Minnekayev was quoted as claiming that there were "indications that the Russian-speaking population is being oppressed" in Transnistria, indicating greater ambitions beyond Ukraine's borders for the Russian military.

## The Occupation

In contrast to Bucha and other towns in northern Ukraine, Russian troops appear to have been less brutal towards the local population in Kherson Oblast. One reason for this might be that the Russian occupiers are trying to persuade the people of the region to support the invaders in their project to fragment the Ukrainian state. However, while Russia definitely had support from some of the local population in Crimea and parts of the Donbas in 2014,

the situation in the south is somewhat different. Perhaps even more now than in 2014, the Kremlin has misjudged the mood of the population in Ukraine's south. This means that Russia in Kherson Oblast risks long-term broad resistance, a partisan movement, and more ambitious attempts by Ukrainian forces to regain control of the region.

In the Kherson city, for instance, none of the leading politicians, not even openly pro-Russian ones representing the party "Opposition Platform – For Life" party, led by the oligarch and friend of Putin Viktor Medvedchuk, did show any desire to collaborate with the occupying authorities. Only gradually did Russia manage to replace the mayors of Kherson Oblast with handpicked figures sympathetic to Moscow. Only on 25 April, almost two months into the occupation, was the Ukrainian flag removed from the city authority's building, and Kherson Mayor Ihor Kolykhayev, who had continued to serve in accordance with Ukrainian law, removed from office. He was replaced by his former chauffeur, Oleksandr Kobets, as head of the pro-Russia city council.

The most influential Russia-collaborating regional politician is Volodymyr Saldo, who had served as mayor of Kherson in 2002–2012 before being elected to Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, as member of then-President Viktor Yanukovich' Party of the Regions. In the 2020 local elections, Saldo ran for mayor of Kherson once again, but lost in the second round to Kolykhayev. Saldo initially took a cautious stance towards the occupying powers, and his supporters claimed that the Russian authorities were forcing him to cooperate. By mid-March, however, he had helped to create the collaborationist "Rescue Committee for Peace and Order", together with Kyrylo Stremousov, a pro-Russian blogger and conspiracy theorist. A month later, Saldo became the head of the Kherson region's newly established pro-Moscow "civil-military administration", with Stremousov as his deputy head.

It took Russia more than a month to solidify control of the region amid growing frustration, as more OMON special police and National Guard units had to be sent from Russia. Regular protest rallies against the occupation were held in central Kherson, but from late April these were dispersed more harshly. Protesters have been detained in "filtration camps" after being picked up off the streets or in their homes by occupying Russian forces. Even so, the protests continue on an irregular basis. On 20 May, a peaceful protest against the Russian occupation and a proposed pseudo-referendum on the establishment of a "Kherson People's Republic" (KhNR) took place in Kherson. The occupiers used tear gas and stun grenades to disperse the crowds, injuring and detaining some.

The Russian occupation has changed life profoundly for residents. The Russian occupiers have re-erected a statue of Lenin in Kherson's main square. Teachers have been told to adopt the Russian curriculum and language when classes resume after the summer. Internet connections have been partly rerouted through Russian censors to monitor and control communications and access to Ukrainian television channels has been blocked. Telecommunications services are now only available in Russian and the Ukrainian prefix +380 has been changed to the Russian +7. The occupiers are phasing out Ukrainian Hryvnas and aim to replace them with Russian roubles in a four-month transition period starting on 1 May. According to official Ukrainian estimations, thousands of residents of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts have fled, in parts of the regions half of the population, sometimes waiting days to pass through Russian checkpoints where they face lengthy interrogation. Reports of Russian occupants stealing grain in the regions have resurrected memories of the of the man-made famine, the Holodomor, perpetrated by Stalin in 1932–33.

## Scenarios

Taking control of parts of Ukraine's south and creating a land bridge from Crimea to the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) is one of the few achievements of the Russian army in Ukraine. In the end, Putin may try to sell an eventual annexation of the Kherson Oblast as a win for his so-called "special military operation".

There are several scenarios for how Russia might deal with Kherson Oblast and the other newly occupied territories in southern Ukraine. The Kremlin could use the pro-Russian collaborator authorities under its control to create "pro-Russian quasi-states", such as a KhNR, following the model of the DNR and the "Luhansk People's Republic" (LNR) in the Donbas. Alternatively, the Kremlin might consider a speedier annexation of the regions as another option, as it did with Crimea in 2014.

According to a [Facebook post](#) on 16 April by the Ukrainian Human Rights Ombudswoman Lyudmila Denisova, Russia had already prepared promotional material and ballot papers for a sham referendum on the creation of the KhNR planned for 1–10 May. On 22 April, President Volodymyr Zelenskyi, in a direct speech to the residents of occupied Kherson, accused Russia of planning to orchestrate a referendum and urged residents to be careful about sharing personal data with Russian soldiers, warning that there could be attempts to falsify votes. Shortly after, the planned date was advanced to 27 April, only to be postponed to an unknown future date. The subject of the planned sham referendum also differed in [various statements](#), from the creation of a KhNR to annexation by Russia.

As an alternative to the creation of a KhNR, a leaked document has discussed the creation of a "State of Southern Rus", a statelet to be created from some of the southern regions of Ukraine occupied by Russian forces. This "Manifesto of the South-Russian Congress" was leaked by [Radio Liberty's Skhemy \(Schemes\)](#) project. Metadata in the Word document identified by Schemes indicates that it was created by senior members of Putin's United Russia Party on 16 April 2022 and then circulated within Russia's ruling circles. The "manifesto" did not, however, specify which occupied territories would make up the new state, and it seems obvious that the idea of creating such a "state" was not anchored in the regions themselves.

The other scenario for Russia is a speedy annexation, along the lines of Crimea in 2014, of the territories of southern Ukraine controlled by Russian forces, with or without a sham referendum. Putin's 25 May decree might point to a such an attempt at speedier annexation. Kyrylo Stremousov, deputy head of the Kherson collaborator civil-military administration, [stated](#) on 11 May that there would be a request to make the Kherson region a full part of the Russian Federation "by the end of the year". He suggested that the Russian-backed authorities would appeal directly to Putin without a vote as the international community had roundly rejected Moscow's takeover of Crimea. He was, however, contradicted on this by Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesperson, who [said](#) apparently without irony that "such a fateful decision should have an absolutely clear legal background, a legal justification, be absolutely legitimate, just as it was in the case of Crimea".

## Implications

Eventually, a complicating factor connected with the potential annexation of occupied

territories is that Russia would be likely to permit itself to threaten use of, or even actually use, tactical nuclear weapons to defend what it claims to be Russian territory. Already on 27 February 2022, Putin ordered his military to put Russia's nuclear forces on high alert. Russia's nuclear doctrine, as formulated in the 2020 official document Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence, clearly allows nuclear weapon use in response to "aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy" (article 17). The Kremlin could therefore frame a Ukrainian counteroffensive into annexed territory as a "threat to the existence of the Russian state". By using such absurd reasoning as threatening to use nuclear weapons, Russia would hope to deter a Ukrainian counter offensive, and possibly also reduce the Western military assistance that would enable them, even if it were in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter on the right to self-defence. This nuclear scenario has, however, been played down recently by some Russian representatives, such as the Russian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Andrei Kelin, and the Russian spokeswoman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova.

Even without the potential use of nuclear weapons, a quick annexation of Ukrainian territories newly occupied by Russia would seek to present Kyiv with a *fait accompli* that, at least according to Russian logic, would preclude any negotiations on territorial boundaries, as in the case of the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Such a move would also enable Russia to consider any potential Ukrainian counterattack as a pretext to demand that the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) states come to its aid, insinuating an attack on the entire alliance which would trigger article 4 of the CSTO Charter on collective defence. Although the leaders of the CSTO have not shown any overwhelming interest in joining Russia's war effort, Russia still has significant economic and military leverage over them. Belarus dictator, Aleksandr Lukashenko, is the most pressured by Russia. He allowed Russia to invade Ukraine from Belarus' territory on 24 February, and on 26 May, he ordered the opening of a new military command in the south of the country, bordering Ukraine.

Apparently, with Ukrainian forces from the end of May conducting a counter offensive in the northwest of Kherson and with a Ukrainian partisan movement operating in both Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, the Kremlin has yet to settle on how to deal with the issue of the newly occupied territories. One of Russia's objectives is probably to cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, which, among other things, would provide Russia with one or more "land corridors" between different Russia-controlled territories and weaken Ukraine economically. To do so, it is likely to continue to try to consolidate control over and perhaps also "recognise" the territories of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, either as separate people's republics or together with DNR/LNR as a combined statelet ("Novorossiia" or "State of Southern Rus", or a modern version of the historical "Taurida Governorate" connecting the Kherson region with Crimea). It also cannot be ruled out that Moscow might annex these territories more quickly, maybe even in connection with other Kremlin proxy statelets such as Transnistria (in Moldova) or the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia (in Georgia). The former case requires a Russian occupation of Odesa Oblast as well. As for the latter, a sham referendum was originally scheduled to take place in South Ossetia on 17 July 2022 over the question of unification with the Russian Federation but was later postponed to an indefinite date.

Just as the annexation of Crimea did not sate Russia's appetite, any further Russian recognition of Ukrainian territory as sovereign or part of Russia is likely to be followed by further Russian aggression towards Ukraine, including attempts to establish and consolidate

control over even more Ukrainian territory. In a bizarre way, Ukraine could potentially be carved up by Russia in a piecemeal approach. This would contribute to weakening Ukraine militarily, politically, or economically to the extent that Russia establishes political control over the whole of Ukraine or large parts of it through further military action or negotiations.

No matter what way Russia chooses to implement its control over Ukraine's regions, the response from international community must be to never accept any fruits of Russian aggression, to demand immediate withdrawal of Russian troops, and re-establish Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.



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