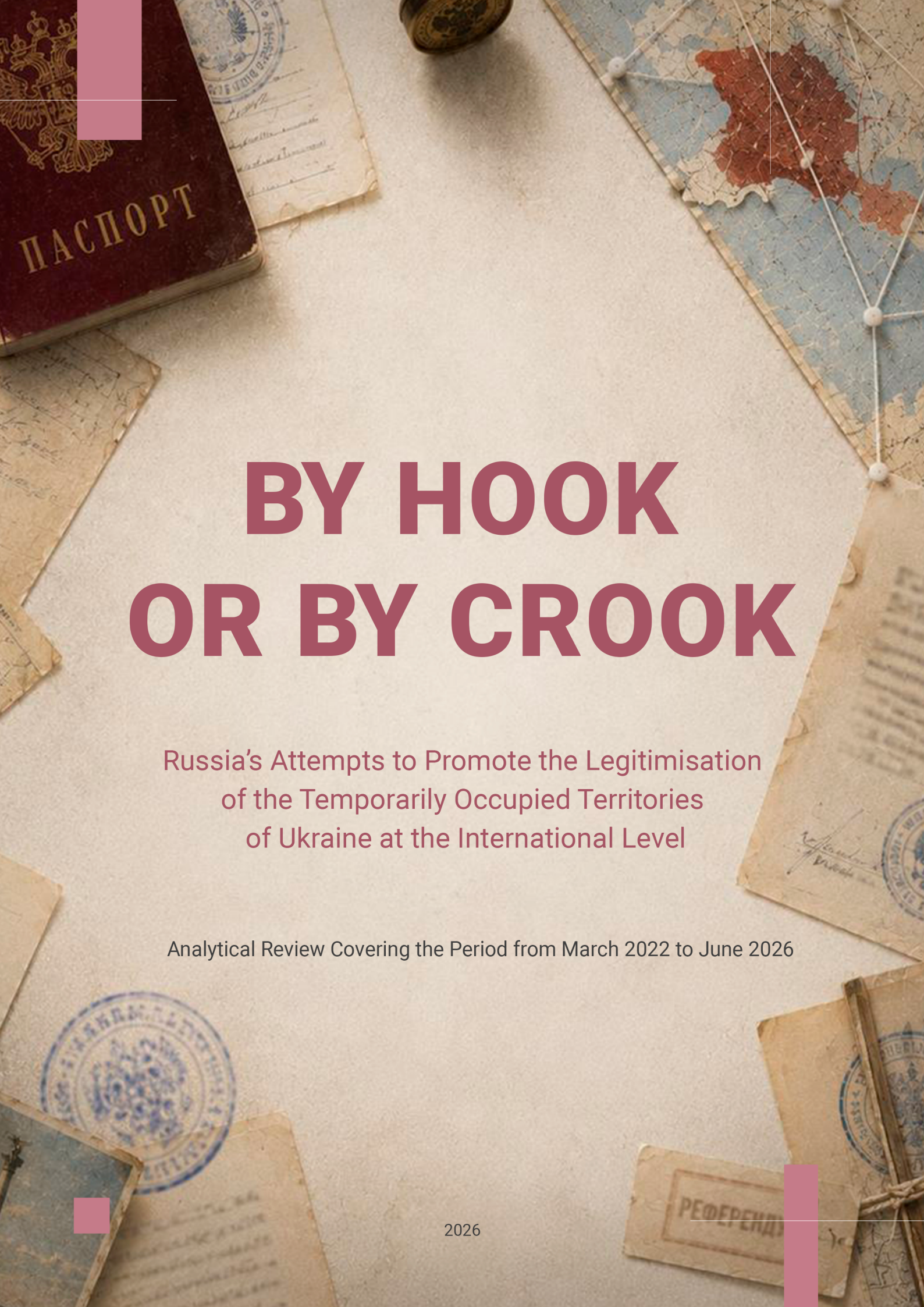


The background of the cover is a collage of historical and administrative documents. In the top left, a dark red passport with the word 'ПАСПОРТ' (Passport) in gold Cyrillic letters is visible. To its right is a piece of aged paper with a blue circular official stamp and handwritten text. Further right is a fragment of a map showing a red landmass on a blue sea, held together by white string. In the bottom left, another document features a large blue circular stamp. In the bottom right, a small piece of paper has the word 'РЕФЕРЕНД' (Referendum) printed on it. A small, dark, round object, possibly a compass or a seal, is at the top center. The overall aesthetic is that of a historical or archival collection.

BY HOOK OR BY CROOK

Russia's Attempts to Promote the Legitimisation
of the Temporarily Occupied Territories
of Ukraine at the International Level

Analytical Review Covering the Period from March 2022 to June 2026

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INTRODUCTION

By Hook or by Crook: Russia's Attempts to Promote the Legitimisation of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine (TOT) at the International Level is the fourteenth publication in a series of analytical reports examining the lives of people living in the territories of Ukraine temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation (TOT).

Previous publications in the series have examined the humanitarian situation in the TOT, including access to food, water, healthcare, education, and housing. They have documented the crimes associated with filtration procedures, the unlawful detention and deportation of Ukrainian civilians, policies of Russification and the eradication of Ukrainian identity, the mechanisms of Russian propaganda, the creation of a digital ghetto in the occupied territories, restrictions on freedom of movement for residents of the TOT, the development of Russia's military logistics in the occupied territories, and the Ukrainian resistance movement under occupation.

The publication is intended for a broad audience, including anyone interested in the living conditions of people in the temporarily occupied territories and in ways of maintaining contact with them. It may also be of interest to Ukrainian and international experts working on issues related to territories occupied by the Russian Federation. The analytical review is intended to support officials and representatives of Ukrainian state institutions, as well as policymakers and decision-makers responsible for issues relating to the temporarily occupied territories.

This publication examines the range of instruments Russia employs to legitimise its occupation of Ukrainian territory at the international level. These include efforts to secure diplomatic recognition of the annexation of Crimea and the so-called independence of the DPR and the LPR; the activities of the occupation administrations' pseudo-ministries of foreign affairs; the establishment of so-called diplomatic missions and honorary consulates in the temporarily occupied territories; and the conclusion of "cooperation agreements" with the occupation authorities. It also analyses the Kremlin's soft power instruments, including attempts to legitimise pseudo-referendums through fake "international observers", pseudo-diplomatic infiltration conducted via marginal European non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the use of geographical maps as a propaganda tool, and economic schemes aimed at legitimising grain stolen from the temporarily occupied territories. Finally, the publication demonstrates that, despite Russia's sustained efforts to legitimise its temporary occupation of Ukrainian regions—whether through diplomacy, coercive instruments or soft power—it remains far from achieving genuine international acceptance of its territorial claims.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to comprehensively document and analyse the instruments and channels Russia employs to transform its temporary occupation of Ukrainian territory into a recognised international status quo, whether de facto or de jure. The research demonstrates that these efforts are systematic rather than incidental, encompassing several dimensions: official diplomacy, institutional mechanisms, economic instruments, and the use of soft power and propaganda. The publication further argues that, despite years of sustained efforts, Russia has achieved only limited and largely situational results rather than genuine recognition by the international community.

At the same time, the research seeks to highlight the risks posed by the gradual normalisation of these practices and the consequent erosion of the principle of territorial integrity under international law. From a practical perspective, the publication aims to provide policymakers, public institutions and experts working on issues related to the temporarily occupied territories (TOT) with an evidence-based analytical framework for identifying, documenting and effectively countering similar attempts to legitimise the occupation.

The study is based on desk research method. The primary source material consists of the monitoring reports produced by the Luhansk Regional Human Rights Centre Alternative (Alternative) on developments in the occupied territories. In total, the research draws upon 57 editions of the *Life under Occupation* digest, prepared by the organisation's experts between March 2022 and June 2026.

These monitoring reports document evidence of terror perpetrated by the Russian armed forces and the occupation authorities, the abduction of civilians, the deportation of Ukrainian citizens, including children, unlawful mobilisation in the occupied territories, humanitarian challenges, the use of propaganda as an instrument of pressure against the civilian population, forced Russification, and acts of resistance by Ukrainians against Russian occupation. The documented information was collected by Alternative's experts from open sources, including national media outlets, social media platforms, Telegram channels and statements by public officials. These findings were further verified through testimonies provided by trusted contacts who remained in the temporarily occupied territories and were able to corroborate the reported information.

RUSSIA'S PURSUIT OF THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL AND LEGAL RECOGNITION OF THE TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE

Russia has consistently sought international recognition of the territories it has seized and occupied as part of the Russian Federation in an effort to consolidate its territorial gains under international law.

Since securing de jure **international recognition** of the temporarily occupied territories has, in most cases, been possible only by relying on proxy entities, Russia has pursued a hybrid strategy. Rather than **seeking formal recognition of the occupation**, it has aimed to enlist political support from states within its sphere of influence or persuade them to **vote against United Nations General Assembly resolutions on Ukraine's territorial integrity**.

The principal objectives underlying Russia's efforts to secure recognition of the territories it has seized, occupied or annexed have been as follows:

- ▶ **Legitimisation.** Recognition is intended to transform a temporary occupation into a permanent status quo by providing legal and political justification for the redrawing of Europe's borders.
- ▶ **Legal immunity.** By designating the occupied territories as part of its sovereign territory, Russia seeks to portray any attempt by Ukraine to liberate its own territory as an "attack on the Russian Federation".
- ▶ **Resource mobilisation.** The formal incorporation of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine into the Russian Federation enables Russia to integrate the regions' industrial, agricultural and human resources into its economy and military capabilities.

- **Ethnopolitical transformation.** From the Kremlin's perspective, recognition serves to conceal demographic crimes such as forced passportisation, the deportation of Ukrainians, and the organised resettlement of populations loyal to Moscow from Russia's interior regions.

Ultimately, Russia seeks to **legitimise its act of aggression, consolidate its geopolitical gains, and evade responsibility under international law**. Yet, instead of achieving broad international recognition, its policy has resulted primarily in the creation of a buffer zone along its borders, the exploitation of the resources of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, the replacement of the local population, and the use of nuclear blackmail as an instrument of coercion.

INTERNATIONAL (NON-)RECOGNITION OF THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

On the international stage, Russia seeks to use every available instrument of official diplomacy and soft power to persuade the international community of the legitimacy of its annexation of Crimea. Yet, despite over twelve years of this gradual campaign, Russia remains the only United Nations Member State to have formally recognised the annexation of Crimea through its own domestic legal procedures, including the adoption of legislation, the ratification of treaties, and the issuance of official decrees. All other states have limited their support to declaratory political measures.

UN MEMBER STATES' POSITIONS ON THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

No state in the world — not even Russia's closest allies — **has conducted full-fledged domestic legal procedures**, such as parliamentary approval or the enactment of legislation, to formally recognise Crimea as part of the Russian Federation.

States including **Nicaragua, North Korea, Syria** (prior to the change of government in 2024), and **Venezuela** have instead expressed political support for Russia through diplomatic channels that did not require formal incorporation into domestic legislation:

- **Diplomatic notes and official statements.** Heads of state and ministries of foreign affairs issued official statements supporting Russia's position (for example, the statement by the Speaker of the Syrian Parliament in 2016¹ and the explanatory note

¹ Syria Recognises Crimea as "Part of Russia", Russian Agency Says, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 19 October 2016, <https://surl.li/yfhonm>

issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK in 2017²).

- ▶ **Voting in the United Nations.** These states formally expressed their positions by voting against United Nations General Assembly resolutions on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, most notably Resolution 68/262, Territorial Integrity of Ukraine, adopted on 27 March 2014.
- ▶ **Practical steps.** These included the publication of political maps depicting Crimea as part of Russia (by North Korea and Nicaragua), the conclusion of economic cooperation agreements with the occupation authorities, and the opening of a Nicaraguan honorary consulate in occupied Crimea.

Since international law regards the annexation of Crimea as a serious violation of the Charter of the United Nations, **foreign governments have deliberately avoided passing domestic laws on the borders of the Russian Federation**, so as not to sever their legal ties with the international community.

For many authoritarian regimes, however, political support for Russia has become a matter of regime survival:

- ▶ **Syria** (prior to the change of government). Bashar al-Assad's regime survived the Syrian civil war only because of Russia's direct military intervention beginning in 2015. Syria's votes at the United Nations therefore represented a form of political repayment for that support.
- ▶ **Belarus.** Alexander Lukashenko's regime remains completely dependent on Russian financial subsidies, discounted energy supplies, and security support to maintain its hold on power.
- ▶ **Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.** The military juntas that came to power in the Sahel have relied on Russian mercenaries formerly associated with the Wagner Group (now operating as the Africa Corps) to maintain their rule.

In addition, Russia has long relied on what may be described as "credit diplomacy", alongside arms supplies, to secure political support from economically vulnerable states:

- ▶ **Nicaragua and Venezuela.** Both have received multi-billion-dollar Russian loans, substantial investment in their oil industry, and large-scale deliveries of Russian weapons.
- ▶ **Zimbabwe, Eritrea, and Sudan.** These countries have significant economic agreements with Russia, particularly in the extractive industries—including gold and diamond mining—or depend on supplies of Russian grain and fertilisers.

² Russian Embassy Claims North Korea Has Recognised the Annexation of Crimea, *RBC-Ukraine*, 12 October 2017, <https://surl.li/xcjmjb>

For some states, supporting Russia in UN votes has also served as a means of expressing opposition to the geopolitical dominance of the United States and the West.

- **North Korea, Cuba, and Iran.** All three states remain subject to extensive Western sanctions. They view Russia as a leading force in a “multipolar world” and as a strategic partner in confronting the West, and therefore tend to support the Kremlin’s actions across a wide range of international issues.

The overwhelming majority of United Nations Member States, however, continue to regard the annexation of Crimea as illegal. UN General Assembly resolutions reaffirm Ukraine’s territorial integrity and condemn Russia’s attempted annexation of the peninsula.

SUPPORT FOR THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA BY THE UNRECOGNISED ENTITIES OF ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA

The self-proclaimed entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, neither of which is recognised by the international community as a sovereign state, recognised Russia’s annexation of Crimea immediately after it took place in March 2014.

Being entirely dependent on the Kremlin for financial, political and military support, both entities supported Moscow’s actions in a coordinated manner³. The recognition process took place through official statements by political leaders and official state acts.

For both entities, these votes and statements constituted an expression of complete political loyalty to Russia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia themselves received Russian recognition of their “independence” following the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. Since their budgets, security and continued existence depend almost entirely on Moscow, they have consistently replicated the Kremlin’s geopolitical moves. From the perspective of international law and Ukrainian legislation, however, these statements have no legal force, as both entities are themselves occupied territories of Georgia.

³ International Non-Recognition of the Republic of Crimea, *Wikipedia*, <https://surl.li/yvdhcm>

THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FRIENDS OF CRIMEA (IAFC) AS A SOFT POWER INSTRUMENT

The International Association of Friends of Crimea, established in 2017 at the initiative of the Russian occupation authorities in Crimea and the Russkiy Mir Foundation, functions as an informal international network aimed at legalising the peninsula's illegal annexation and breaking the international diplomatic boycott.

Its organisation consists primarily of marginal European and international politicians—predominantly from the far right and the far left—as well as public figures and business representatives loyal to the Kremlin's policies. Members of the Association participate in propaganda visits to occupied Crimea, organise conferences, and disseminate narratives portraying the annexation as the result of the allegedly “democratic choice” of Crimea's residents⁴.

These activities are financed from the Russian state budget. According to publicly available information, the Russian authorities have spent at least RUB 200 million to support this form of so-called people's diplomacy. Despite these financial investments, however, the International Association of Friends of Crimea has produced virtually no political or diplomatic results. It has failed to break through the peninsula's international isolation, secure the lifting of sanctions, or legitimise the annexation under international law⁵.

⁴ Friends of the Occupation of Crimea, *Center of Journalistic Investigations*, <https://surl.li/hqvmyi>

⁵ “Zero Effect, but the Money Was Spent”: What Europe's “Friends of Crimea” Actually Do, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 February 2021, <https://surl.li/cgwmtq>

(NON-)RECOGNITION OF THE “INDEPENDENCE” OF THE SO-CALLED DPR AND LPR

On 11 May 2014, pro-Russian proxy groups held illegal referendums on the recognition of the sovereignty of the so-called DPR and LPR.

Following the referendum, the so-called LPR immediately launched activities aimed at obtaining recognition of its independence. On 19 May 2014, the so-called Republican Assembly of the LPR sent a **letter to the UN Secretary-General** requesting recognition of its sovereignty and independence, referring to the right of peoples to self-determination and the results of the fake referendum on state independence⁶. On 11 June 2014, the so-called Supreme Council of the LPR **appealed to the Russian Federation** to recognise the LPR as a sovereign and independent state. Similar appeals were also sent to **14 other states**, including Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, China, Serbia, Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua⁷.

As of mid-2026, the **independence of the so-called DPR and LPR has been recognised by only three United Nations Member States: Russia** (which announced its recognition only eight years after the so-called referendum, on 21 February 2022), **Syria and North Korea**.

This decision was also supported by several unrecognised or partially recognised entities, including **Abkhazia** and **South Ossetia**. The rest of the international community considers these entities as an integral part of Ukraine.

⁶ “Luhansk People’s Republic” Asks the United Nations to Recognise Its Independence, *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*, 19 May 2014, <https://lnk.ua/XfNg9VthK>

⁷ The LPR Appeals to Russia to Recognise Its Independence, *Korrespondent.net*, 11 June 2014, <https://lnk.ua/xvwOlwlpz>

RUSSIA: RECOGNITION OF THE DPR/LPR IN 2022 AND THE SHORT PERIOD OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

On the evening of 21 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed two decrees **recognising the DPR and the LPR as so-called sovereign and independent states**⁸, as well as treaties on friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance with the heads of both pseudo-republics (Denys Pushylin and Leonid Pasichnyk). The signing ceremony took place in St Catherine Hall of the Grand Kremlin Palace.

On 22 February 2022, the State Duma and the Federation Council ratified these treaties⁹, and the President of the Russian Federation signed them. **Diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the DPR and LPR were subsequently established.** On 25 February 2022, the **parties exchanged instruments of ratification**, completing the formal procedure.

The next step was the **appointment of ambassadors**. On 6 May 2022, the heads of the DPR and the LPR appointed extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassadors to Russia:

- ▶ Olha Makeieva became the "DPR ambassador" to the Russian Federation. At the time, she was deputy chair of the republic's "People's Council" (parliament). Russia's ambassador to Donetsk was Aleksey Artyakov, the former deputy governor of Russia's Vologda Region.
- ▶ Rodion Miroshnyk became the LPR ambassador to the Russian Federation. He had previously served as the LPR representative in the political subgroup of the Trilateral Contact Group on the Peaceful Settlement of the Situation in Eastern Ukraine. Russia's ambassador to Luhansk was Oleksii Uvarov.

The next stage was **the opening of the "DPR/LPR embassies" in Moscow and the presentation of credentials**:

- ▶ The "DPR embassy" in the Russian Federation was established on 13 May 2022 and opened in Moscow on 13 July 2022 at 13 Grokholsky Lane, Building 2.
- ▶ The "LPR embassy" was established on 19 July 2022 and was subsequently located at the same address.

⁸ Putin Signs Decrees Recognising the "LPR" and the "DPR", *BBC News Ukrainian*, 21 February 2022, <https://surl.li/drtkfi>

⁹ Russia's State Duma Ratifies Treaties with the "LPR" and the "DPR", *Suspilne News*, 22 February 2022, <https://surl.li/qgqsxx>

Moscow did not open its own diplomatic missions in the so-called DPR/LPR. In essence, this was the diplomatic formalisation of subordination rather than the establishment of normal bilateral relations.



Embassy of the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR in Moscow, 12 July 2022. Reuters.

Following the annexation of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine in September 2022, the separate “foreign policy structures of the DPR/LPR” became legally redundant, as the territory formally became part of the Russian Federation, whose international relations are conducted by the federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a result, the “DPR/LPR embassies” existed only briefly. On 14 November 2022, the head of the LPR, Leonid Pasichnyk, announced the start of the procedure to liquidate the republic’s “ministry of foreign affairs” and its embassy in Moscow by 1 June 2023. A similar decree on the liquidation of the “DPR ministry of foreign affairs” was signed by acting head of the DPR Denys Pushylin on 30 June 2023, with the procedure to be completed by 31 August of the same year, although the decree was extended on several occasions.

SYRIA: RECOGNITION AND SUBSEQUENT WITHDRAWAL OF RECOGNITION OF THE “DPR” AND “LPR”

The Syrian Arab Republic officially recognised the “independence and sovereignty” of the so-called DPR and LPR on 29 June 2022¹⁰. It became the second country in the world (after Russia) to take this step.

Even before the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion, in mid-February 2022, the Syrian authorities announced that they were ready to support Moscow’s decision and establish relations with the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine¹¹. In mid-June 2022, dictator Bashar al-Assad met with a Russian delegation and representatives of the occupation authorities of Donetsk. During the meeting, he announced the launch of the official procedure for recognising the DPR and LPR¹².

On 29 June 2022, the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement via the state news agency SANA, stating that the decision had been taken “in fulfilment of the common will and the desire to establish relations in all spheres”. Damascus also announced its intention to establish diplomatic relations with the pseudo-republics¹³.

The following day, on 30 June 2022, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyi and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine announced the complete severance of diplomatic relations with Syria¹⁴. Ukraine imposed a full trade embargo on Syria and introduced sanctions against Syrian legal entities and individuals.

Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in December 2024, Syria’s position changed fundamentally. The country’s new authorities completely reviewed relations with Russia, withdrew recognition of the annexation of Crimea and of the DPR/LPR, and officially recognised Ukraine’s territorial integrity. In September 2025, Ukraine and Syria restored diplomatic relations¹⁵. On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyi and President

¹⁰ Syria Recognises the Independence of the “LPR” and the “DPR”, Media Reports, *Ukrinform*, 29 June 2022, <https://surl.li/leiaof>

¹¹ Syria officially recognized the so-called “LPR” and “DPR”, *Rubryka*, 29.06.2022, <https://surl.li/zfpcrd>

¹² Syria Recognises the Independence of the DPR and the LPR, *Meduza*, 29 June 2022, <https://surl.li/wolzqs>

¹³ Syria Decides to Recognise the “Independence” of the “LPR” and the “DPR”, *Slovo i Dilo*, 29 June 2022. <https://surl.li/uxajoh>

¹⁴ Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Announces the Severance of Diplomatic Relations with Syria, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 June 2022, <https://surl.li/sztbld>

¹⁵ Ukraine and Syria restore diplomatic relations after Assad’s downfall, *NV*, 25.09.2025, <https://surl.li/zemdau>

of Syria Ahmed al-Sharaa¹⁶ signed a joint communiqué to that effect¹⁷. Syria thus became the first state in the world to establish diplomatic relations with Ukraine twice.

NORTH KOREA: COORDINATING RECOGNITION OF THE “DPR” AND “LPR” THROUGH MOSCOW

The DPRK (North Korea) officially recognised the independence of the “DPR” and “LPR” on 13 July 2022. The procedure for formalising this decision was purely formal and was coordinated through Moscow. North Korea’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs presented an **official note recognising the “republics”** to the Russian ambassador to the DPRK¹⁸. On the same day, North Korea’s ambassador to Russia, Sin Hong Chol, **met with the “DPR” representative in Moscow**, Olha Makeieva, and handed her the document on the recognition of sovereignty¹⁹. The following day, North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui sent official letters to her “colleagues” in occupied Donetsk and Luhansk, stating that Pyongyang sought to develop “state relations” with them²⁰.

On the same day, 13 July 2022, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine announced the complete severance of diplomatic relations with the DPRK. Kyiv condemned Pyongyang’s decision as an attempt to undermine Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity²¹. Political and economic contacts with the DPRK had already been frozen at that time because of UN international sanctions against the North Korean regime.

¹⁶ Meeting Between the Presidents of Ukraine and Syria Took Place in New York, During Which Foreign Ministers Signed a Joint Communiqué on the Restoration of Diplomatic Relations, *President of Ukraine*, 25 September 2025, <https://surli.li/siwuys>

¹⁷ Joint Communiqué on the Restoration of Diplomatic Relations Between Ukraine and the Syrian Arab Republic, *Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Legislation of Ukraine*, 24 September 2025, <https://surli.lu/unozew>

¹⁸ North Korea Recognises the Puppet “DPR” and “LPR”, *Ukrinform*, 13 July 2022, <https://surli.li/ltzfxm>

¹⁹ North Korea recognises breakaway of Russia’s proxies in east Ukraine, *Reuters*, 14.07.2022, <https://surli.cc/efeedy>

²⁰ North Korea recognizes breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine, *NK News*, 14.07.2022, <https://surli.li/aboovt>

²¹ Ukraine Severs Diplomatic Relations with North Korea Following Its Recognition of the “LPR” and the “DPR”, *European Pravda*, 13 July 2022, <https://surli.cc/nogiqr>

SOUTH OSSETIA: RECOGNITION FOR BANKING TRANSACTIONS

South Ossetia is a region of Georgia occupied by Russia with an internationally unrecognised status. Before Russia’s annexation of the “DPR” and “LPR”, however, it played a particular role in legitimising the hybrid occupation through financial mechanisms.

South Ossetia first recognised the independence of the “LPR” on 17 June 2014, and ten days later, on 27 June 2014, it recognised the independence of the so-called DPR²². By 2015, “diplomatic relations” had been established between these entities, and in 2017, they signed “treaties on friendship and mutual assistance”, while the occupation administrations of Donetsk and Luhansk opened their “representative offices” in Tskhinvali.

The reasons for this pseudo-diplomatic recognition, however, were financial. Since, before February 2022, Russia officially regarded Donbas as part of Ukraine, it could not conduct banking transactions directly with the militants. To address this, a scheme was established through South Ossetia, which Russia had recognised back in 2008.

The “International Settlement Bank” (an Ossetian bank operating under Moscow’s supervision) was opened in Tskhinvali. Enterprises from the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts processed contracts through this bank. This enabled Russia to finance the occupation regimes, supply them with goods, and export Ukrainian coal and metal without direct financial interaction between Russian banks and the “DPR/LPR”, thereby protecting the Russian financial system from additional sanctions.

²² South Ossetia Recognises the Independence of the Self-Proclaimed DPR, *LB.ua*, 27 June 2014, <https://lnk.ua/Wuer2wcgc>

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE SO-CALLED MINISTRIES OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE “DPR” AND “LPR” (2014–2026)

Following the so-called elections to the governing bodies of the self-proclaimed “DPR” and “LPR” in November 2014, “ministries of foreign affairs” were established in these newly created entities.

The main function of both “ministries” was to represent certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in the Trilateral Contact Group on the Peaceful Settlement of the Situation in Eastern Ukraine (the Minsk format) – negotiations involving representatives of Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE, in which the “DPR” and the “LPR” each appointed their own representative.

THE “MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE DPR” (2014–2026)

The first head of the “**DPR ministry of foreign affairs**” was **Oleksandr Kofman**, who held this position until February 2016. On 29 November 2014, the European Union added him to its sanctions list as minister of foreign affairs and first deputy chair of the “DPR parliament” for his participation in the illegal elections that violated Ukrainian legislation.

From 2016, the ministry was headed by **Nataliia Nykonorova**²³, who, from September 2018,

²³ Acting “Foreign Minister” Appointed in the DPR: Former MP Piskun’s Aide Takes the Post, *RBC-Ukraine*, 23 February 2016, <https://surl.li/xpdful>

also represented the “DPR” in the Trilateral Contact Group²⁴. Nataliia Nykonorova is subject to personal sanctions imposed by the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Switzerland, Australia, and Japan²⁵.

The “DPR ministry of foreign affairs” is an interesting case because this structure continues to exist and operate formally even after Russia officially incorporated the “DPR” as a region of the Russian Federation in 2022 and the “head of the DPR”, Denys Pushylin, signed a “decree” ordering the liquidation of the pseudo-republic’s “ministry of foreign affairs” by 31 August 2023²⁶. According to the “official website of the DPR government”, Nataliia Nykonorova still holds the position of “minister of foreign affairs”, despite having been elected a senator of the Russian Federation in December 2022. Thus, despite the disappearance of the legal basis for a separate “foreign policy body” of an unrecognised entity, the institution continues to function as an instrument of pseudo-diplomacy.

The functions of the “DPR ministry of foreign affairs” are as follows:

- ▶ **Representation of the “DPR” in the Trilateral Contact Group until 2022.** Compared with the “LPR”, the “DPR ministry of foreign affairs” demonstrated a significantly broader and more active role in the Minsk process. It ensured not only procedural participation but also was engaged in systematic public communication (in particular, Nataliia Nykonorova gave dozens of interviews to various media outlets, including international ones), promoted humanitarian rhetoric (particularly on prisoners and pensions), and provided an ideological justification for the position of “politics first, then security”²⁷. This function of the “DPR ministry of foreign affairs” ended when Russia announced its withdrawal from the Minsk process on 22 February 2022.
- ▶ **Parallel “diplomacy” with other unrecognised or partially recognised entities.** The “DPR ministry of foreign affairs” continues to organise delegation visits to South Ossetia on a regular basis. Representatives of the ministry have repeatedly visited Tskhinvali, and “minister” Nykonorova took part in the inauguration ceremony of the President of South Ossetia on 24 May 2022. This creates a network of mutual “recognition” among unrecognised or partially recognised entities (South Ossetia, Abkhazia, the DPR/LPR), compensating for the absence of recognition by the legitimate international community.
- ▶ **Contacts with Russia’s allies outside the post-Soviet space.** A “DPR” delegation headed by the “minister” visited Syria in April 2021 and met with the deputy secretary-general of the Ba’ath Party in June 2022. In this way, the ministry seeks to imitate full-

²⁴ Nataliia Nykonorova to Head the DPR Separatist Delegation in Minsk, *Novynarnia*, 12 September 2018, <https://surl.it/wydxae>

²⁵ Who Is Nataliia Nykonorova? A Profile of Russia’s Senator from the “DPR”, *Bakhmut.in.ua*, 9 October 2024, <https://surl.li/pcpbhz>

²⁶ The “Ministry of Foreign Affairs” of the “DPR” Will Be Dissolved by the End of This Summer, *Vilne Radio*, 30 June 2023, <https://surl.li/nyythi>

²⁷ The “DPR” Sets Out the Conditions for Returning to Ukraine, *Novynarnia*, 18 April 2016, <https://surl.li/ekoanh>

fledged interstate relations with regimes friendly to Moscow.

- ▶ **Organising the entry of foreign “journalists” and “analysts” into the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.** Visits by journalists and analysts from France, Italy, Germany, Serbia, Nicaragua, and North Korea to the Olenivka detention centre in August 2022 have been documented^{28,29}. Thus, the “DPR ministry of foreign affairs” performs the role of organiser and host for foreign nationals loyal to it, providing them with “insider” access that is unavailable to independent journalists or international monitoring missions.
- ▶ **Propaganda communication through Russian media.** The leadership of the “DPR ministry of foreign affairs” regularly appeared, and continues to appear, on Russian federal television channels and at events such as the Livadia Club (a public and political discussion platform of the Institute of CIS Countries, which regularly conducts pro-Russian propaganda events in Crimea and the occupied territories). Thus, the ministry functions not so much as a diplomatic apparatus in the classical sense as a propaganda platform integrated into the Russian media space.
- ▶ **Approach to international monitoring missions.** The “DPR ministry of foreign affairs” participated in the process of terminating the activities of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in the territory of the “DPR”³⁰. Thus, one of the practical functions of the “DPR ministry of foreign affairs” is to drive genuine international monitoring organisations out of the occupied territory.

The existence of a separate “foreign policy body” creates the illusion that the “DPR” possesses agency and independence, even while Moscow simultaneously insists on the full integration of this territory into the Russian Federation. Thus, the Kremlin simultaneously exploits both the narrative of “accession” and the narrative of “independent expression of will”, depending on the audience.

²⁸ A Putin Ally Brought “International Experts” from North Korea and Nicaragua to Olenivka, *Channel 24*, 9 August 2022, <https://surl.li/nvaibd>

²⁹ 2 years after Ukrainian POW prison attack, survivors and leaked UN analysis point to Russia as culprit, *Voice of America*, 25.07.2024, <https://surl.li/dfdzw>

³⁰ The So-Called DPR Bans the Activities of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission, *Channel 24*, 10 April 2022, <https://surl.li/nodszl>

THE “MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE LPR” (2017–2022)

In the “LPR”, the so-called ministry of foreign affairs was established in autumn 2017. It was headed by **Vladyslav Deineho**, who at that time represented certain areas of Luhansk oblast in the Trilateral Contact Group on the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine³¹. He remained in this position until 14 November 2022, that is, until the annexation of the pseudo-republic by Russia.

The activities of the “LPR ministry of foreign affairs” were limited to representing the “LPR” in the Trilateral Contact Group on the Peaceful Settlement of the Situation in Eastern Ukraine. Thus, the institution, in the person of its head, effectively functioned as the apparatus for a single diplomatic mission – participation in the Minsk process throughout the entire eight-year period (2014–2022).

Unlike the “DPR”, where the ministry of foreign affairs still exists as a separate functioning institution with an active “minister”, the foreign policy functions of the “LPR” were discontinued in 2022.

Thus, the asymmetric institutional fate of the two formally “equal” pseudo-republics may reflect different levels of trust from Moscow or different priorities regarding “public diplomacy” for each of the two entities.

³¹ Will Deineho Head the “Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the LPR”?, *Realna Gazeta*, 11 September 2017, <https://surl.li/auyxny>

OPENING OF “DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS” IN THE TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE

Despite recognising the “DPR” and the “LPR” as so-called sovereign and independent states and even establishing diplomatic relations with the “DPR” and the “LPR”, Russia never opened its own diplomatic or consular missions in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.

OPENING OF SOUTH OSSETIAN “DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS” IN DONETSK AND LUHANSK

On 16 April 2015, the unrecognised entity of **South Ossetia** opened **two diplomatic missions** simultaneously – **one in Donetsk and one in Luhansk**. A distinctive feature of the opening of these “diplomatic missions” was that they began operating before diplomatic relations had been formally established between South Ossetia and the “DPR” and the “LPR”.

The protocol on the establishment of diplomatic relations, together with the **treaty on friendship and mutual assistance** between the “DPR” and South Ossetia, was signed on 11 May 2017. A similar agreement on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the “LPR” and South Ossetia was signed on 12 May 2019.

South Ossetia is itself an unrecognised or partially recognised entity dependent on Moscow, just as the “DPR/LPR” were. Thus, this was an exchange of missions between two mutually dependent, unrecognised entities within the same Russian sphere of influence.

No state other than the unrecognised entity of South Ossetia opened fully fledged consulates directly in the territory of the “DPR” or the “LPR”, as doing so would have constituted direct recognition of the occupation, a step that even most of the Kremlin’s “friends” have not taken.

HONORARY CONSULATE OF NICARAGUA IN SIMFEROPOL

On 10 November 2020, the “honorary consulate” of Nicaragua was opened in Simferopol³². Russian sources repeatedly stated explicitly that it was the “**first consulate of a foreign state in the region since 2014**” and the “**first diplomatic mission in the Republic of Crimea**”. Thus, Russia itself effectively acknowledged that, six years after the annexation, no other state had ventured to open a diplomatic mission in Crimea.

Oleg Belaventsev, Putin’s former plenipotentiary representative in Crimea, who was directly involved in the 2014 annexation, was appointed head of Nicaragua’s “honorary consulate” in Simferopol³³.

In practice, Moscow used Nicaragua as an instrument for demonstrating an international presence in Crimea. This step had a propaganda effect, creating the appearance of recognition of Russia’s sovereignty over Crimea by at least one foreign state.

Ukraine reacted sharply to this unfriendly act. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine regarded the opening of the consulate as a “direct violation of the legislation of Ukraine and an unfriendly step by Nicaragua” and submitted an official note of protest³⁴. In February 2021, the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine and the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine also approved sectoral sanctions against Nicaragua in response to its decision to open a consulate on the occupied peninsula³⁵.

³² Why Does the Kremlin Need Nicaragua’s “Honorary Consulates” in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine?, *Voice of Crimea*, 15 January 2026, <https://surl.li/tejwot>

³³ Nicaragua Opens an Honorary Consulate in Annexed Crimea, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 10 November 2020, <https://surl.li/cuuotz>

³⁴ Ukraine Lodges a Protest with Nicaragua and Imposes Sanctions over the Honorary Consulate in Crimea, *European Pravda*, 10 November 2020, <https://surl.li/jaorni>

³⁵ On the Decision of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine of 1 February 2021 “On the Application of Sectoral Special Economic and Other Restrictive Measures (Sanctions)”, *Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Legislation of Ukraine*, 1 February 2021, <https://surl.li/wxyraf>

KREMLIN PRESSURE TO OPEN A BELARUSIAN CONSULATE IN CRIMEA

Initiatives and official requests to open a Belarusian consulate in annexed Crimea have come exclusively from local collaborators and pro-Russian figures on the peninsula, while official Minsk has for years avoided making such a decision.

The principal advocate of this initiative is Roman Chegrinets, head of the Kremlin-controlled organisation “Belarusians of Crimea” and a member of the so-called Public Chamber of Crimea. On numerous occasions (including during visits to Belarus in 2023 and in public statements in January 2025), he has stated that opening a consulate is an “urgent necessity”.

The occupation authorities justify the need for a consulate by referring to the large number of Belarusian tourists visiting the peninsula. According to them, if Belarusian citizens lose their documents, they must apply to the nearest Belarusian consulate in Rostov-on-Don (Russian Federation), creating significant bureaucratic difficulties. In addition, the occupation authorities have proposed opening a reciprocal “representation of Crimea” in Minsk.

The dependent regime of Alexander Lukashenko, despite its close integration with Russia and political statements about the “de facto recognition” of Crimea as Russian, **avoids opening an official consulate on the peninsula**. Minsk understands that such a step would constitute a final legal break in diplomatic relations with Kyiv and would automatically trigger severe sectoral sanctions from Ukraine and Western states³⁶.

³⁶ Proposal to Open a Belarusian Consulate in Crimea, *Reformation*, 15 July 2023, <https://surl.li/lsvvwt>

CONCLUSION OF COOPERATION AGREEMENTS WITH THE TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE

Whereas in European countries Russia has sought to establish pseudo-diplomatic missions through marginal NGOs, it pursues a different approach with friendly regimes outside Europe by entering directly into official interstate agreements. The most striking example is Nicaragua, a Latin American country, where Moscow employs a mechanism of “recognition of occupied territories in exchange for investment”.

In July 2021³⁷ and again in January 2024³⁸, **Nicaragua and the occupation “authorities” in Crimea** signed **“agreements on trade and economic cooperation”**. These agreements are legally null and void, as they were signed by illegitimate representatives, and are not recognised by Ukraine or the international community. In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine submitted a note of protest to the government of Nicaragua and once again called for the revocation of all unlawful decisions concerning the Autonomous Republic of Crimea as an integral part of the territory of Ukraine³⁹.

Nicaragua subsequently not only recognised the “independence of the DPR/LPR” in 2022, but also formally concluded separate **agreements on trade and economic cooperation with these**

³⁷ Nicaragua and the “Authorities” of Crimea Sign a Trade Cooperation Agreement, *Babel*, 14 July 2021, <https://surli.cc/xtbgyu>

³⁸ Russian Occupation Authorities in Crimea Sign a Cooperation Agreement with Nicaragua, *Crimean Tatar Resource Center*, 24 January 2024, <https://surli.li/kmmjrs>

³⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sends a Note of Protest to Nicaragua over the Cooperation Agreement with Crimea, *LB.ua*, 7 July 2021, <https://surli.li/tmiapq>

“republics”, the temporarily occupied territories of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts⁴⁰, and the city of Sevastopol⁴¹ in October 2025. The agreements were signed on 22 September 2025 in Moscow at the Reception House of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the presence of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

All the heads of the annexed territories attended in person: Leonid Pasichnyk (“LPR”), Denys Pushylin (“DPR”), Yevhen Balytskyi (the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia oblast), Volodymyr Saldo (the occupied part of Kherson oblast), as well as Maria Litovko, deputy “governor” of Sevastopol. On behalf of Nicaragua, the document was signed by Laureano Ortega Murillo, Special Representative of the President for Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the son of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

It should be understood that the real economic scale of this cooperation between Russia and a small Central American country with a limited economy remains symbolic and does not alter the international legal status of the temporarily occupied territories. The principal function of the agreement is not practical or economic, but propagandistic: it is intended to demonstrate the “normality” of the annexation.

Alongside the economic agreements, another agreement of a different nature was signed. On 4 June 2026, the “official” media of the so-called DPR and LPR – the Donetsk News Agency and the Luhansk Information Centre – concluded a separate **cooperation agreement with a media holding⁴²** headed by Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo, another son of the Nicaraguan dictator, who is responsible for state propaganda in Nicaragua itself⁴³.

⁴⁰ Agreement with Nicaragua: The Kremlin Imitates “International Recognition” of the Occupied Territories, *Center for Countering Disinformation*, 23 September 2025, <https://surl.li/jjahbp>

⁴¹ Nicaragua Approves Trade Agreements with Occupied Sevastopol and Donetsk, *Suspilne Crimea*, 27 November 2025, <https://surl.li/qkhkgu>

⁴² Nicaragua Signs a “Cooperation Agreement” with the Occupation Administrations’ Media Outlets, *Realna Gazeta*, 4 June 2026, <https://surl.li/djgxfi>

⁴³ The “Official” Media of the “DPR” and the “LPR” Sign a Cooperation Agreement with the Son of Nicaragua’s Dictator, Who Oversees State Propaganda, *OstroV*, 4 June 2026, <https://surl.li/kobvjp>

KREMLIN SOFT POWER INSTRUMENTS FOR LEGITIMISING THE TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

ATTEMPTS TO LEGITIMISE PSEUDO-REFERENDUMS AND PSEUDO-ELECTIONS IN THE TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES THROUGH “INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS” (2014–2023)

When Russia announced the holding of **pseudo-referendums in Crimea on 16 March 2014 and in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts on 12 May 2014**, the United Nations, the European Union, the OSCE, and even the CIS declined to send official international election observation missions, as they did not recognise these referendums as constitutional. Likewise, no internationally recognised organisation specialising in election observation sent representatives to monitor the unlawful “**elections**” to the so-called governing bodies of the self-proclaimed “DPR” and “LPR” held on 2 November 2014.

Instead, Russia brought its own loyal “foreign observers” to every fake vote held in the temporarily

occupied territories of Ukraine and sought to use them to “legitimise” the voting. Referring to their participation, the Kremlin claimed that the “plebiscites” complied with international norms and standards and sought to convince audiences that Russia enjoyed broad support abroad among politicians, journalists, and intellectuals who backed its actions.

In 2015, all so-called foreign observers who had participated in the pseudo-referendums and pseudo-elections in Crimea and certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were included in Ukraine’s official sanctions list of individuals. As a result, their participation carried not only reputational but also legal consequences⁴⁴.

From 23 to 27 September 2022, Russia once again organised **pseudo-referendums on the accession of the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts to Russia**. Owing to low turnout, armed individuals went door to door collecting signatures while threatening residents with execution. No government and no reputable international organisation specialising in election observation delegated representatives to these pseudo-referendums. At the same time, in an effort to demonstrate that the pseudo-referendums were supposedly legitimate, Russia once again invited “foreign observers”⁴⁵.

A year later, during the **fake local “elections” held on 10 September 2023 in the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts**, synchronised with Russia’s “Single Voting Day”, Russia repeated the same tactic of bringing in its own loyal observers. During these pseudo-elections in the newly occupied territories, 64 so-called international observers from various countries were identified. The largest group consisted of citizens of European countries (43 individuals), including 11 from France, eight from Italy, two each from Slovakia, Lithuania and the Czech Republic, and four each from Germany and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Observers were also identified from Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Mexico, the United States, Uruguay, Cameroon, Mozambique, Indonesia, Egypt, Togo, South Africa, as well as Belarus, Iran, and Syria.

Most of these “foreign observers” were invited by the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation. Their role as “observers” was limited to visiting polling stations for “voting”, appearing in propaganda television reports, and participating in press conferences where they declared that there had been “no violations”, that the process had been “transparent”, and that the fake “elections” and pseudo-referendums were “fully legitimate”.

The foreign nationals involved in these pseudo-elections can be divided into several groups:

- Individuals directly involved in producing propaganda content. Some presented themselves as independent bloggers or journalists, while others were employees of Russian media outlets or administrators of websites affiliated with the Kremlin (for example, the Russian news agency Sputnik and the Tsargrad television channel).

⁴⁴ Ukraine Finally Imposes Sanctions against Russia: Full List of Individuals and Companies, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 17 September 2015, <https://surl.li/jwoeoq>

⁴⁵ Who Were the International Observers at the Pseudo-Referendums?, *Svidomi*, 1 October 2022, <https://surl.li/aakhbk>

- ▶ Far-right and left-wing politicians, including communists, united by anti-globalism and hostility towards “Western imperialism”. Within their ideological worldview, Russia represents a model of democracy and justice, while the imperialist and neocolonial nature of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine goes unnoticed.
- ▶ Individuals associated at the time with Yevgeny Prigozhin’s organisation, the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC), which was originally established as a network of agents of influence and political commentators to promote Russian interests on the African continent, but was also successfully used in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine⁴⁶.
- ▶ Little-known individuals who most likely took advantage of an opportunity to earn money.

Compared with 2014, in 2022 and 2023 Russia found it more difficult to find individuals who appeared respectable and were willing to cooperate with an aggressor and terrorist state by serving as “election observers” in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. Nevertheless, despite Russia’s mass war crimes in the temporarily occupied territories, such individuals can still be found⁴⁷.

ATTEMPTS AT PSEUDO-DIPLOMATIC PENETRATION INTO EUROPE THROUGH MARGINAL NGOS (2014–2022)

Attempts to open fully fledged “representative offices” of the so-called DPR and LPR in democratic European countries proved to be the least durable means of legitimising the occupation of certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, as they immediately came to the attention of state authorities, the press and the judicial system, all of which have clear legal mechanisms for their swift dismantling.

Six attempts to open such representative offices were documented, all following a common pattern. In most cases, the initiative came from marginal pro-Russian civic activists or minor local figures in the host country. The entity was then registered as an ordinary non-governmental

⁴⁶ “Putin’s Friends” and the Prigozhin Network: Foreign “Observers” at the Pseudo-Elections in the Occupied Territories, *Ukrinform*, 22 September 2023, <https://surl.li/xqepye>

⁴⁷ A Parade of Freaks and Professional “Russians”, *Telegraph*, 26 September 2022, <https://surl.li/apmftw>

organisation under the host country's legislation governing associations. This constituted a legal loophole that made it possible to formally "open an office" without obtaining any diplomatic status. This was followed by an official opening accompanied by a propagandistic presentation.

All such attempts prompted an unequivocal response from the governments of the host countries, including the formal denial of diplomatic status, legal action and, ultimately, dissolution. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine consistently lodged protests with each country in which attempts were recorded to open so-called diplomatic missions of the DPR and LPR.

The first **"DPR representative office"** in the European Union opened **in the city of Ostrava (Czech Republic)**⁴⁸ in September 2016, as the city had been twinned with Donetsk since. It was headed by Nela Lisková, who also led the Czech civic organisation National Militia. The opening ceremony featured a staged presentation with flags, champagne and a local priest to lend the event greater significance. At the same time, protesters gathered outside the hotel where the press conference was being held, carrying placards denouncing the "terrorist organisation DPR".

The response of the Czech authorities was immediate and unequivocal. The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated explicitly that the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" could not have any diplomatic mission or consular office in the Czech Republic, since the Czech Republic did not recognise it as a state and maintained no diplomatic relations with it, while the entity referred to as a "representative office" was, in legal terms, merely a civic association registered by the regional court in Ostrava. Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka personally assured that neither the "DPR" nor the "LPR" would have diplomatic missions in the country. The Czech court first ordered the so-called honorary consulate of the DPR to change its name and subsequently ordered the complete dissolution of the "representative office" following a lawsuit brought by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A journalistic investigation found that six months later no one in the building where the "DPR representative office" had been ceremonially opened had even heard of the organisation.

In Italy, as many as three attempts were recorded to open so-called embassies of the "DPR" and "LPR": a **"DPR representative office"** in **Turin** on 14 December 2016, a **"DPR representative office"** in **Verona** on 9 February 2019, and an **"LPR representative office"** in **Messina** in 2018. Unlike the Czech case, the so-called DPR and LPR representative offices in Italian cities continued to operate for some time and were closed only after President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyi personally appealed to Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in February 2020, asking him to close these "illegal offices". It is noteworthy that, as early as 2019, Italy was also home to a representative office of another unrecognised "republic"—South Ossetia.

Another case was the opening of a representative centre of the so-called **DPR in Athens (Greece)** on 21 March 2017⁴⁹. It was headed by a Greek activist named Zafiris, who had previously been

⁴⁸ Kyiv Calls on the Czech Republic to Close the "DPR Representative Office", *LB.ua*, 1 September 2016, <https://surl.li/zwfuad>

⁴⁹ The "DPR" Announces the Opening of Its "Representative Office" in Greece; Athens Responds, *UNIAN*, 22 March 2017, <https://surl.it/fgycos>

involved in collecting and delivering humanitarian aid to regions affected by the fighting. His organisation supported two schools in the so-called DPR, where the Greek language was taught. Thus, the point of entry was humanitarian activity, which was subsequently converted into a pseudo-diplomatic format.

A distinctive feature of the Greek case was that the opening of the so-called representative centre was attended by Panagiotis Lafazanis, the former Minister of Energy of Greece and leader of the Popular Unity party⁵⁰. He publicly wished the so-called DPR success, drawing a direct ideological parallel between Donbas's struggle for "sovereignty and independence" and the political aspirations of his own party in Greece. On behalf of the so-called DPR, the "minister of foreign affairs", Nataliia Nykonorova, personally sent a congratulatory message, thanking the Greeks "for their contribution to the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic as a subject of the international community". In other words, Donetsk immediately sought to present this event as a step towards "international agency", rather than merely the activities of a small humanitarian NGO.

The response of the Greek state was swift and unequivocal. On the evening of the same day, the official spokesperson for the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Greece had never recognised the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" and that any actions undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity were entirely contrary to the position of the Greek government.

The Greek case demonstrates that even where support came from a specific and relatively influential politician, rather than solely from marginal activists as in the Czech and Italian cases, the Greek state apparatus responded immediately and at the highest level. This contradicts the hypothesis that the presence of a "respectable" political supporter automatically ensures the durability of such a structure. What proved decisive was the relevant ministry's prompt and resolute response, rather than the political standing of those behind the "representative office".

The most unsuccessful attempt was the planned opening of a representative office of the so-called **LPR in Austria**. Unlike the previous cases, the initiative did not originate from a local NGO but had the direct personal approval of the highest "leadership of the LPR", while the signboard itself was intended to read "official representative office". However, unlike the other European cases described above where representative offices physically opened before later being challenged or dissolved, the Austrian case is unique in that the representative office never became operational.

Alfred Almeder, who headed the small left-wing humanitarian organisation Working Community for Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine and took part in a propaganda visit to Luhansk on 20–22 August 2016 as part of a group of foreign civic figures, was chosen to serve as the "honorary consul" of the "LPR" in Austria. Some time later, he himself abandoned the idea⁵¹. A distinctive feature

⁵⁰ Dancing, Tattoos and Pilates: How the "Representative Offices" of the "DPR" Operate in Europe, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 27 March 2017, <https://surl.it/oochpy>

⁵¹ The "LPR" Announces the Opening of a "Representative Office" in Austria; Ambassador Calls It a Farce, *European Pravda*, 9 September 2016, <https://surl.li/xpyzwh>

of this case is that the “representative office” did not emerge as the result of negotiations or an agreement but rather through the unilateral appropriation of an existing humanitarian organisation by the propaganda machinery of the “LPR”.

On 15 September 2016, the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent an official note verbale to the Ambassador of Ukraine, explicitly stating that the self-proclaimed “Luhansk People’s Republic” was not recognised by Austria and therefore could not open any diplomatic mission or consular office on Austrian territory⁵².

Thus, the mechanism employed by the propaganda apparatus of the “DPR/LPR” in opening so-called diplomatic missions consisted of attempts to convert existing humanitarian infrastructure associated with marginal pro-Russian or radical left-wing groups into an “official representative office” simply by changing the signboard, in some cases even without the consent or full understanding of those involved in the network.

The European “wave of representative offices” between 2016 and 2019 was, in essence, an attempt to test a potential vulnerability in democratic legal systems. It ultimately failed because of those systems’ own institutional resilience.

⁵² The “LPR” Will Not Have a “Representative Office” in Vienna After Failing to Gain Support, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 22 September 2016, <https://surli.cc/jmmrrr>

MAPAGANDA: LEGITIMISING THE TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES THROUGH GEOGRAPHICAL MAPS

Mapaganda (*a blend of the words “map” and “propaganda”*) is the deliberate use of maps as an instrument of manipulation, for example, to create the impression of control over a particular territory even where that control is disputed or unlawful, or to demoralise the local population⁵³. It is a distinct and highly effective instrument because it operates indirectly: maps shape public perceptions of borders while bypassing public political debate.

Ukraine faces the problem of its territories being incorrectly represented in cartographic products. Crimea is often marked as disputed territory, Donetsk oblast as an independent region, while territories occupied since 2022 have appeared on some maps as part of Russia.

Such manifestations of mapaganda have been documented not only in Russia, but also in countries that are partners of Ukraine. With the assistance of foreign publishers and mapping services, Russia uses maps to entrench its ideological narratives. Distorted representations of Ukraine’s borders thus help legitimise Russia’s crimes and reinforce myths that Ukrainian territories are “historically Russian”.

Foreigners viewing cartographic products by well-known producers on which the map of Ukraine is distorted are highly likely to accept what they see as reality because they trust the authority of the source. As a result, disinformation at the educational and publishing level in Western European states creates doubts as to whether the territories temporarily occupied by Russia belong to Ukraine. Public support for Ukraine declines, and the supply of weapons by partner countries is consequently impeded⁵⁴.

The UN website features a map showing the recognised and universally accepted boundaries

⁵³ “Mapaganda”, or How Russia Manipulates Maps, *Vox Ukraine*, 2 December 2024, <https://surl.li/udedlj>

⁵⁴ Stop Mapaganda: How Russia Spreads Propaganda through Maps, *Ukrainian*, 18 August 2023, <https://surl.li/qkzzgj>

of Ukraine under international law⁵⁵. These are the borders of 1991 when Ukraine restored its independence. The UN website also presents a map of Russia within its internationally recognised borders, without Crimea or the other temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine⁵⁶.



Map of Ukraine from the UN website

Any other representation of the borders distorts perceptions of the Russo-Ukrainian war and blurs the distinction between the aggressor state and the country defending itself. It constitutes a violation of international law and Ukraine's territorial integrity, as well as direct participation in hybrid warfare.

⁵⁵ Ukraine, United Nations, Geospatial, location data for a better world, <https://surli.cc/dldvka>

⁵⁶ Russian Federation, United Nations, Geospatial, location data for a better world, <https://surli.li/czjcjb>

THE RUSSIAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY AS A CENTRE OF RUSSIAN MAPAGANDA

The centre of Russian cartographic propaganda is the Russian Geographical Society (RGS), which presents itself as a public non-governmental organisation with a scientific and educational focus. For a long time, the RGS remained outside the Kremlin's attention and received funding only on a residual basis. However, in 2009, following Russia's war against Georgia, the institution began active propaganda activities using cartography and inaccurate maps on which the temporarily occupied territories of other states were marked as Russian or disputed.

Russia's political leadership took control of the society. Vladimir Putin became chair of the newly established Board of Trustees, while Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu became president of the RGS. The board included Russia's most prominent oligarchs and senior officials, while the society's partners included major state corporations and organisations such as Gazprom, RusHydro, Sovfracht and Russian Post. The RGS receives information support from propaganda media outlets and news agencies, including TASS, Channel One, Sputnik, Zvezda, Komsomolskaya Pravda and others.

Although the RGS officially defines its purpose as "the collection and dissemination of accurate geographical information", it has become an important instrument of hybrid warfare in the international arena and in education. After Russia began its war against Ukraine in 2014, the society started establishing contacts abroad and cooperating with foreign academic institutions. Geographical societies in the United States, Germany, Spain, Italy, China, Türkiye and other countries were subsequently added to its list of partners. In 2016, during an RGS awards ceremony, Putin, when asked where Russia's borders ended, replied that they "do not end anywhere"⁵⁷.

⁵⁷ Putin Says That "Russia's Border Does Not End Anywhere", *BBC News Ukrainian*, 24 November 2016, <https://surl.li/vudfbb>

CHANNELS FOR DISSEMINATING RUSSIAN MAPAGANDA WORLDWIDE: DEVELOPERS, PUBLISHERS AND DISTRIBUTORS

The RGS cooperates with private companies that participate directly in spreading Kremlin narratives and distorted representations of Ukraine's borders. Alongside Russian propaganda media, the well-known organisation **National Geographic** contributes to the dissemination of cartographic disinformation.

As early as 19 March 2014, the National Geographic team stated⁵⁸ that, following the ratification of the pseudo-referendum by the Russian State Duma, it would mark Crimea in grey as a territory with "special status", while adding explanatory text concerning Russia's occupation of the peninsula⁵⁹. National Geographic's cartographic products depict Ukraine's borders in five ways:

- ▶ Crimea is shown as an integral part of Ukraine.
- ▶ A state border is shown between Ukraine and Crimea, which is an integral part of Ukraine.
- ▶ Crimea, which is an integral part of Ukraine, is partially shown as territory of the Russian Federation through hatched shading.
- ▶ Crimea, which is an integral part of Ukraine, is shown entirely as territory of the Russian Federation.
- ▶ Crimea, which is an integral part of Ukraine, is partially shown as territory of the Russian Federation "claimed by Ukraine". Under this formulation, Ukraine is portrayed as the aggressor claiming part of the Russian Federation.

The organisation follows a similar practice with regard to Georgian territories occupied by Russia, as well as other "disputed" territories. National Geographic explains that this approach is intended to reflect current realities on its maps as accurately as possible. At the same time, the organisation has stated that its policy on depicting Crimea does not mean that it supports the occupation.

A large-scale study identified more than 30 international companies that develop and print

⁵⁸ How Should Crimea Be Shown on National Geographic Maps? *National Geographic*, 19.03.2014, <https://surl.li/rksoqh>

⁵⁹ National Geographic: An International Propaganda Mouthpiece for the Kremlin and a Russian Information Warfare Tool, <https://surl.li/uazpmn>

cartographic products with distorted representations of Ukraine's borders in EU countries, the United Kingdom and the United States⁶⁰.

Russia has also created a distribution system comprising more than 500 shops in the EU and the United Kingdom. They sell printed products from brands that publish maps incorrectly depicting Ukraine's borders, thereby contributing to Russian mapaganda. This network includes Germany's largest bookshop chains, Thalia.de and Hugendubel, their Swiss subsidiary Orell Füssli, as well as Amazon.de, Bucher.de and the British company Maps Worldwide.

ONLINE PLATFORMS DISSEMINATING DISTORTED MAPS

One of the principal instruments in the digital sphere is **geolocation-based discrimination**, which involves displaying different maps in different countries. The clearest example is Google Maps. When the website is accessed from Ukraine, no boundary is shown between Crimea and Ukraine, while a clear border is displayed between Crimea and Russia. When accessed from Russia, the opposite is shown: a line resembling an international border is drawn between Crimea and Ukraine. Google officially explains this by stating that localised Google Maps content is subject to the jurisdiction of the relevant domestic law. In other words, the company deliberately adapts its representation of reality to the legislation of the aggressor state.

For third countries, such as Germany or Kazakhstan, Google shows an intermediate version: a dotted line marking "disputed" territories, which in effect places illegal annexation on the same footing as legitimate territorial disputes.

Other mapping companies follow similar practices, including Natural Earth, a well-known platform used to create maps, and OpenStreetMap.

Creating multiple alternative viewpoints is a core strategy of Russian propaganda. It enables Russia to confuse foreigners who do not delve into the details of the Russo-Ukrainian war and to promote the narrative that "things are not so clear-cut".

⁶⁰ Mykola Holubei, "The Spread of Russian Soft Propaganda in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States", drive.google.com

ECONOMIC INSTRUMENTS OF INFLUENCE FOR SECURING DIPLOMATIC SUPPORT AT THE UNITED NATIONS: THE CASE OF UKRAINIAN GRAIN FROM THE TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Analysis of satellite imagery by NASA Harvest⁶¹ shows that the annual harvest in the temporarily occupied territories amounts to approximately 6 million tonnes of wheat⁶². Virtually all grain harvested in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine is sold abroad by Russia through criminal schemes. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, between January and April 2026, 25 vessels from Russia's grain fleet completed around 50 direct voyages from Ukrainian ports in the occupied territories to third countries. During this period, more than 850,000 tonnes of grain were exported from the occupied territories of Ukraine⁶³.

In recent years, the mechanism for stealing grain, removing it from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and selling it abroad has developed into a clear and repeatable system. The occupation authorities in the temporarily occupied territories established "grain operators", through whom Ukrainian farmers are forced to sell wheat to Russia at artificially reduced prices of RUB 7,000–8,000 (USD 80–90) per tonne, roughly half the market price in Russia

⁶¹ NASA Harvest, <https://www.nasaharvest.org>

⁶² Grain Wars: How Russia Is Building a Food Empire on Stolen Ukrainian Grain, *RBC-Ukraine*, 19 May 2026, <https://surl.li/fzyajy>

⁶³ Sybiha: Since the Beginning of the Year, Russia Has Removed More Than 850,000 Tonnes of Grain from Ukraine's Occupied Territories, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 29 April 2026, <https://surl.li/dzvffa>

(USD 150–220) and substantially below prices in Ukraine (USD 230–260). At the same time, the occupation authorities apply administrative pressure by threatening to withhold “declarations of conformity”.

Russia has thus monopolised the trade in grain grown in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, eliminating competition among buyers and taking control of logistics, enabling the occupiers to dictate artificially low prices regardless of actual market value⁶⁴. As a result, Ukrainian farmers in the temporarily occupied territories are left with only two options: either sell their harvest to the occupiers or lose it altogether, as no official sales channels are available to them⁶⁵.

Grain is removed from the temporarily occupied territories through the ports of Crimea and the Sea of Azov, primarily the closed ports of Sevastopol and Mariupol. The country of origin and the port of shipment are then falsified through forged bills of lading (documents issued by the carrier to the shipper). These documents list legitimate Russian ports, such as Novorossiysk or Temryuk, as the ports of shipment, while certificates of origin are issued by Russian companies⁶⁶.

In some cases, the stolen grain is mixed with Russian grain, making the product’s chemical profile indistinct and rendering it almost impossible to prove that it originated in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. In addition to grain, Russia actively steals and resells abroad other agricultural products from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, including meal (the residue remaining after oil extraction from seeds), which is subsequently used as feed for livestock and poultry.

Russia sells wheat stolen from Ukraine to nearly 70 countries around the world and seeks to maintain its leading position on the global market by relying on grain from the temporarily occupied territories⁶⁷. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Russia has supplied stolen Ukrainian grain to Türkiye, Algeria, Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Israel. Other purchasers of stolen agricultural products include Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Djibouti, while small volumes have even reached several Balkan countries. In addition, Russia has resumed grain exports to Syria⁶⁸. The most challenging situation concerns supplies of stolen Ukrainian grain to Libya. Because the country is divided into zones of influence controlled by different groups, Russia uses local ports as “grey harbours”—locations where cargo is transshipped or its documentation is reissued with minimal oversight.

⁶⁴ CCD: Occupiers Force Farmers in the Temporarily Occupied Territories to Deliver Ukrainian Grain to Russian State Reserves, *LB.ua*, 21 June 2025, <https://surl.li/klhgyf>

⁶⁵ NRC: Occupiers Use “Subsidies” to Cover Up the Looting of Ukrainian Farmers in the Temporarily Occupied Territories, *LB.ua*, 11 October 2025, <https://surl.li/ckxbob>

⁶⁶ How Russia Steals Ukrainian Grain: Office of the President Reveals the Criminal Scheme, *RBC-Ukraine*, 19 May 2025, <https://surl.li/wkqyca>

⁶⁷ NRC: Russia Sells Wheat Stolen from Ukraine to 70 Countries Worldwide, *LB.ua*, 19 August 2025, <https://surl.li/syvhdg>

⁶⁸ Russia Exported over Two Million Tonnes of Grain from Ukraine’s Temporarily Occupied Territories in 2025, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 18 January 2026, <https://surl.li/zdtsks>

To sell grain stolen from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, the Kremlin relies primarily on dumping. Russia offers discounts of USD 30–40 per tonne because it bears none of the costs of cultivating crops on the occupied land. For poorer countries in Africa and the Middle East, such discounts are critical to maintaining domestic stability and keeping bread prices low. Russia also employs non-market instruments by implementing an “all or nothing” policy: if an African country seeks to purchase even a relatively small quantity of agricultural products from Ukrainian exporters, Russia threatens to cancel its own export contracts. As a result, even African countries that publicly support Ukraine are often forced to purchase agricultural and food products from Russia.



Russia systematically uses stolen Ukrainian grain as an **instrument of expansion in the countries of the Global South**, with the aim of controlling global bread prices in much the same way that it sought for decades to manipulate gas prices. In this context, driving Ukraine out of its traditional markets represents an attempt to eliminate one of the few competitors capable of disrupting these plans. Given that total global grain production has not increased in recent years, while the population of the countries of the Global South continues to grow, this problem is likely to become increasingly acute.

Within this strategy, food is transformed into a **political instrument of international influence** that can be used not only to generate revenue but also to buy votes at the United Nations or provoke migration crises in Europe through artificially induced hunger in the countries of the Global South.

In the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, Russia has effectively acquired an additional land bank covering millions of hectares without having to invest in its development. The land, the people farming it and the infrastructure were already in place; all that remained was to integrate production into Russia's system of control. As a result, the occupied parts of Kherson and

Zaporizhzhia oblasts, together with southern Donetsk oblast, are gradually being transformed not into regions of development but into an **agricultural appendage of the Russian economy**.

The crop structure clearly illustrates this approach to agriculture in the temporarily occupied territories. The strongest performance is seen in export- and profit-oriented crops (spring rapeseed — 119.9% of the target; sunflower — 102%; sugar beet — 96.6%; spring barley — 97.2%), whereas crops of greater importance for domestic consumption show significantly weaker results (buckwheat — 56.9%; rice — 63.7%; soybeans — 79.2%).

In essence, Russia is implementing a **classic twenty-first-century colonial model** in which the metropole receives raw materials while the colony provides land, resources, and logistics. The profits, however, are concentrated outside the territory itself: grain stolen from the temporarily occupied territories and sold on external markets generates foreign exchange earnings for the aggressor state and is used as an instrument of geopolitical influence rather than to meet the needs of the local population living in the temporarily occupied territories.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite years of systematic efforts at the legal, diplomatic, institutional, informational and economic levels, Russia has failed to achieve its principal objective: securing international recognition of the occupation and annexation of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. At the same time, the combination of its hybrid instruments has enabled it to consolidate de facto control over these territories, exploit their resources and undermine the international legal principle of territorial integrity..

THE SYSTEMATIC AND MULTI-LEVEL NATURE OF RUSSIA'S LEGITIMISATION EFFORTS. Russia's efforts to secure international recognition of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine are not isolated episodes but rather constitute a consistent, long-term strategy encompassing several parallel dimensions: the official diplomatic dimension (de jure/ de facto recognition by individual states), the quasi-institutional dimension (the activities of pseudo-ministries of foreign affairs, "diplomatic missions" and consulates), the contractual dimension (agreements on "cooperation" with the occupation authorities), soft power instruments (pseudo-observers, pseudo-diplomatic penetration through marginal NGOs, and geographical maps), and the economic dimension (the legalisation of stolen grain).

THE FAILURE OF THE DE JURE RECOGNITION STRATEGY. More than twelve years after the annexation of Crimea and more than ten years after the launch of efforts to legitimise the "DPR" and the "LPR", not a single state, including the Kremlin's closest allies, has conducted a full domestic legal procedure recognising these territories as part of the Russian Federation. Russia remains the only state to have recognised the annexation of Crimea through its own legal instruments. This demonstrates that even authoritarian regimes and those dependent on Moscow recognise the significance of the international legal consequences of such a step and deliberately avoid its definitive legal formalisation.

HYBRID TACTICS INSTEAD OF DIRECT RECOGNITION. Since full de jure recognition of the occupation and annexation of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine has proved unattainable, Russia has systematically resorted to surrogate forms of legitimisation: voting against United Nations General Assembly resolutions on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, declaratory statements by heads of state and ministries of foreign affairs, the opening of honorary consulates of foreign states in the occupied territories, the publication of political maps depicting the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine as part of Russia, and the conclusion of symbolic agreements on "economic cooperation". Although these measures have no legal force, they serve a propaganda function by creating the illusion of the recognised subjectivity of the occupied territories within the information space.

THE LIMITED CIRCLE OF PARTNER STATES AND THE MOTIVES BEHIND THEIR SUPPORT. Genuine, albeit largely declaratory, support for Russia comes from a limited group

of states: Nicaragua, North Korea, Syria (until 2024), Venezuela, as well as the unrecognised entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Their position is explained not by ideological affinity but by specific military or economic dependence or by a shared anti-Western orientation under conditions of sanctions.

THE DUAL AND CONTRADICTIONAL INSTRUMENTALISATION OF THE “DPR” AND THE “LPR”. The Kremlin simultaneously exploits two mutually exclusive narratives: the “independent statehood” of the pseudo-republics and their “organic integration” into the Russian Federation, switching between them depending on the target audience. The asymmetric fate of the “ministry of foreign affairs of the DPR” (which continues to operate) and the “ministry of foreign affairs of the LPR” (which was dissolved in 2022) illustrates that these institutions were always instruments rather than attributes of genuine statehood.

THE FAILURE OF RUSSIA’S EFFORTS TO EXPORT PSEUDO-DIPLOMACY TO DEMOCRATIC EUROPEAN STATES. All six documented attempts to open “representative offices” of the “DPR” and the “LPR” in European states (the Czech Republic, Italy, Greece and Austria) ultimately failed due to the swift and unequivocal response of the state authorities, judicial systems and civil society in those countries. This demonstrates the institutional resilience of democratic legal systems even in the presence of influential supporters of pro-Russian narratives.

THE INDIRECT LEGITIMISATION THROUGH THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF PERCEPTION. Instruments such as the geolocation-based differentiated maps used by Google Maps demonstrate that Russia operates not only through official diplomacy but also by shaping the public’s subconscious perception of borders while bypassing public political debate. In this process, the decisions of private technology companies also play a significant and ambiguous role.

ECONOMIC ANNEXATION AS A PARALLEL YET THE MOST EFFECTIVE INSTRUMENT. The theft and legalisation of grain from the temporarily occupied territories (around 6 million tonnes annually, sold to 70 countries) constitute the most tangible and financially effective instrument for consolidating control over these territories, in contrast to the predominantly symbolic nature of diplomatic gestures. The crop structure in the temporarily occupied territories confirms that these territories are being transformed into a classic colonial raw-material appendage rather than an object of development.

FOOD AS AN INSTRUMENT OF GLOBAL INFLUENCE. The dumping of stolen grain enables Russia not only to generate revenue but also to keep poorer countries in Africa and the Middle East in a position of dependence, drive Ukraine out of its traditional markets and potentially convert this leverage into political loyalty, including votes at the United Nations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ... For the state authorities of Ukraine, civil society and journalists: **document cases of pseudo-diplomatic penetration by Russia or its proxy groups and systematise the monitoring of attempts to normalise and secure recognition of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.** Establish a continuously updated database of all contacts between foreign states, companies, NGOs, and individuals and the occupation administrations of the temporarily occupied territories to enable prompt responses through diplomatic notes of protest, sanctions and legal proceedings against any attempts to recognise Russia's occupation and annexation of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.
- ... For think tanks and experts: **examine the motivational profiles of Russia's partner states.** Conduct an in-depth analysis of the specific instruments of dependence (loans, arms, energy supplies and mercenaries) affecting each state that supports recognition of the temporarily occupied territories, in order to enable targeted proposals to international partners for compensatory mechanisms that reduce the effectiveness of Russian influence.
- ... For international organisations and partner states: **develop a single agreed position on the "grey zones" of recognition.** Develop a shared international standard for responding to intermediate (non-de jure) forms of legitimisation, including honorary consulates, trade agreements and cartographic designations, in order to prevent the Kremlin from exploiting legal gaps between full recognition and complete non-recognition of the status of the temporarily occupied territories.
- ... For representatives of international organisations: **strengthen the monitoring of pseudo-electoral processes.** The OSCE, the United Nations and specialised election observation missions should publicly and systematically document and refute the activities of "international observers" at pseudo-referendums, including by publishing official lists and profiles of the individuals involved, in order to deprive this practice of even the illusion of authority.
- ... For state and private institutions: **raise the issue of geolocation-based discrimination on maps.** Initiate an official dialogue and, where necessary, legal proceedings against technology companies whose policies on the localised display of borders effectively legitimise the annexation for users in Russia, with the aim of establishing a single

standard for displaying Ukraine's internationally recognised borders regardless of the jurisdiction from which a request originates.

- ... For law enforcement and fiscal authorities: **strengthen the tracing of supply chains for stolen Ukrainian grain.** Expand cooperation with international partners, including NATO, the European Union and relevant United Nations agencies, to verify the origin of agricultural products shipped from the ports of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, document forged bills of lading and certificates of origin, and initiate legal proceedings against intermediary companies.
- ... For Ukrainian and international experts: **develop a methodology for verifying the origin of products from the temporarily occupied territories.** In cooperation with NASA Harvest and similar satellite monitoring initiatives, develop a transparent and accessible tool enabling importing countries to verify the origin of grain and other agricultural products.
- ... For state authorities and donor partners: **invest in long-term documentation to support future accountability.** Ensure the systematic collection and archiving of the evidence base (agreements, statements, and the membership of pseudo-institutions) for subsequent use in international judicial proceedings, transitional justice mechanisms and in support of claims for reparations.