Why Donbas Is Important for Russia

26 OCTOBER 2025

Jordan Miranda and Maksym Loharzhevskyi



Introduction

Understanding Russia's goals in Ukraine and the changing security landscape in Europe requires an understanding of the Donbas region. Because it reflects the profound historical, strategic, and ideological underpinnings of Russian policy, its relevance goes beyond the battlefield. Four factors are examined in this study to determine why Donbas is crucial for Moscow: the historical logic of control, its geopolitical and strategic function, its industrial and economic significance, and the long-term effects of continued

occupation. Comprehending these elements makes clearer Russia's long-term objectives as well as the wider threats to international peace and stability in Europe.

The Historical Logic of Control

To understand why Donbas matters so much to Russia, it helps to look at the region's deep roots in Russian and Soviet history. Donbas was one of the main engines of industrial growth in the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. Its coal mines and steel plants powered much of the Soviet economy and became symbols of national pride, hard work, and unity. During World War II, the fight to defend and later reclaim Donbas from Nazi forces was celebrated as a story of endurance and sacrifice—an idea that still shapes how Russia sees the region today.

Moreover, the process by which Russia justifies "liberating" an oppressed Russian people, traceable in its propaganda, is not a new concept. The invasion and annexation of eastern Ukraine follow a historical pattern that many outside observers often overlook. Namely, the same security logic has been evident throughout Russia's wars with the Swedish and Polish states in continental Europe. From the imperial period onward, Russia aimed to establish itself as the dominant power in Eastern Europe, often through the absorption of surrounding territories and populations. Cultural blending and systematic efforts to replace local identities—seen in Finland, the Baltic states, and Poland—were part of a broader strategy to strengthen Russia's security position and expand its influence. This framing continues to shape the Kremlin's thinking today: projecting Russian power, safeguarding its sphere of influence, and preventing Ukraine's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

In addition, Russia has historically secured its borders through expansion and cultural manipulation. Russian culture, Orthodoxy, and political systems were dispersed over Eastern Europe during the Tsars and Soviets in order to solidify borders and validate power. Under a modernized guise, Putin's administration has brought this pattern back to life by portraying itself as the "guardian" of the Russian world (Russkiy Mir) from Western intrusion. The story closely resembles his statements in which he portrayed the US and NATO as existential enemies out to destroy Russia's area of influence. Thus, the war in Donbas is framed ideologically as a geopolitical struggle for the future of European security, rather than a regional battle.

In this sense, Russia's actions in Donbas reflect a broader pattern seen in other historical examples of aggressive revisionism. Like Adolf Hitler's invocation of ethnic Germans in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland to justify expansion, Putin's claims of defending "oppressed Russians" mask imperial ambitions under the rhetoric of protection. Both narratives rely on manipulating identity politics to rationalize the absorption of neighboring territories and the reordering of regional power balances.

From a historical security perspective, Donbas has always been viewed as a protective zone along Russia's vulnerable southwestern frontier. The vast steppe offered no natural barrier against invasion which has driven successive Russian rulers to seek control or domination there. Moreover, past European invasions had strengthened the idea that maintaining influence over eastern Ukraine was crucial to preventing further assaults. We believe that Moscow's activities in the present are motivated by the same strategic drive, since Ukraine is viewed as the contemporary counterpart of such past concerns due to its westward drive toward NATO.

Geopolitical and Strategic Role

Firstly, the Donbas region provides Russia with significant strategic depth on its southwestern flank. Its terrain allows for both conventional and unconventional military networks to be deployed, sustaining pressure across southeastern Ukraine while reducing response times for offensive coordination. Furthermore, forward-deployed forces, command centers, and logistics corridors establish early-warning and interdiction zones that raise the operational and humanitarian costs for Ukraine while constraining Kyiv's drone and long-range strike capabilities.

Additionally, control of the Donbas establishes a continuous land corridor that connects Crimea and Russia. Without depending on the Crimean bridge, sea lanes, or air transportation—all of which are susceptible to interdiction—this corridor ensures the safe overland movement of troops, military hardware, and financial resources. In terms of strategy, this corridor expands Russia's operational reach throughout the Black Sea, giving Moscow the ability to impose restrictions on marine trade, threaten Ukrainian ports like Odesa and Mykolaiv, and solidify its hold on southern Ukraine. Donbas essentially serves as a forward-operating platform from which Russia may project military might along vital maritime chokepoints and throughout the region.

The region also serves as a pressure point in negotiations and a means of preserving instability in Ukraine short of full-scale occupation. Russia can continuously erode Ukrainian government, rebuilding, and Euro-Atlantic integration by controlling Donbas, thereby influencing Ukraine's political environment in a way that benefits Moscow. Donbas gives Russia more regional clout in Eastern Europe and lets its neighbors know that it can still establish political and military supremacy outside of its acknowledged boundaries.

In terms of politics, Donbas is key to Russia's larger plan to alter the security order in Eurasia after the Cold War. Moscow sees Ukraine's entry into NATO and the EU as a direct challenge to its dominance and believes that the European security architecture put in place following the fall of the Soviet Union is skewed excessively toward Western interests. Russia can project power deep into Ukraine, undermine Kyiv's sovereignty, and

keep influence over the political and economic direction of the nation by controlling Donbas. And this sends a strong message to the rest of the world: Moscow is ready to use both military and political force to defend its interests, even in the face of Western resistance. As a result, Donbas turns into a test site for Russia's larger geopolitical goals, which include undermining NATO's unity, upending Western-aligned nations, and gaining influence in international diplomatic settings. Moreover, on the global stage, Donbas exemplifies Russia's hybrid approach to modern warfare—combining territorial occupation, proxy governance, and economic leverage to achieve strategic goals without triggering direct confrontation with NATO or the United States. Furthermore, the strategic narrative, which Putin has recalled across interviews and speeches, frames a defense of the Russian people, legitimizing his domestic agenda and destabilizing the American rules-led world order.

Economic and Industrial Importance

From a broader perspective, Donbas holds substantial economic and strategic value for Russia due to its geographic, industrial, and resource assets. Geographically, as mentioned before, the area acts as a land corridor and buffer between Russia and Crimea and the southern Ukrainian seized areas. By allowing military and economic logistics to be moved overland, this contiguous line of control lessens dependency on the interdictable air, sea, and bridge routes over the Crimea. And thus, Russia is able to retain secret trade routes and enable oil exports both internally and internationally by securing Crimea, a vital warm-water port. In this case, the dependability of these supply lines is guaranteed by control over Donbas.

Industrially, Donbas historically has been one of Ukraine's most important economic hubs because of coal, steel, and critical mineral deposits concentrated there. And Russia's dominance of the area can both reduce Ukrainian industrial capacity and widen the economic divide between eastern and western Ukraine, which could exacerbate anti-Kyiv sentiments. Furthermore, state-building initiatives can be complicated by the high reconstruction expenditures associated with any potential reintegration of Donbas into Ukraine.

Referring to the past events, the symbolism of the Ukrainian Minerals Deal signed between the USA and Ukraine does not have as many teeth as it would if Ukraine reversed the territorial control in Donbas. Coal, steel, and critical mineral deposits are found across the Donbas and significant amounts of industrial capability have allowed the USSR to have parity with the West in economic competition. In spite of economic stagnation after the end of the Cold War, Donbas's contributions in agriculture and railroad supply chains are critical for maintaining Ukrainian economic activity. There is a reason Ukraine was referred to as the "breadbasket" of the Soviet

Union, and both Russia and Ukraine recognize the economic role Donbas plays.

The Future Implications

First, the key to comprehending Donbas's future significance for Russia is its strategic and military ramifications. By institutionalizing a corridor for Russian power projection over southern Ukraine and the Black Sea, any deal that relinquishes Ukrainian land in Donbas would strengthen Russian dominance over Crimea. This would enforce Russia's long-term security buffer against NATO and increase its strategic depth. It would, however, also solidify a highly militarized border, increasing the likelihood of cross-border conflicts and a persistent arms buildup. Hence, this reasoning has clear policy ramifications: official acknowledgement of Russian dominance would justify military buildup and change the eastern security framework of Europe.

Second, there are two realities presented by the economic implications. Donbas's industrial base, steel, and coal are valuable resources that might help maintain local output and partially offset sanctions, making this factor a crucial one from the global security agenda perspective. However, protracted conflict has destroyed the region's economy. Donbas might become a long-term financial problem because of the enormous reconstruction expenditures and Russia's isolation from the rest of the world. Moscow's already meager financial resources will be put under pressure to maintain essential public services and infrastructure, which could lead to social and political unrest.

Thirdly, there are still important political and ideological ramifications. By advancing narratives of preserving the "Russian world" and safeguarding ethnic Russians abroad, control over Donbas allows the Kremlin to maintain domestic legitimacy (Russkiy Mir). Yet, a protracted occupation without a definite victory could weaken public support if the human and financial costs rise.

Fourth, the geopolitical and diplomatic fallout could alter Europe's security landscape. As President Zelenskyi stressed, a "frozen conflict" akin to the Korean Peninsula might emerge in the Donbas, particularly since Western countries are unlikely to recognize Russian control over the region. This condition, which is marked by stationary frontlines and unsettled sovereignty, would ensure that the core strategic issues between Russia and Ukraine remain unresolved and can prolong instability.

Lastly, the demographic and social repercussions will persist. Donbas' identity is being reshaped by mass displacement and cultural assimilation initiatives, which may make future political and social reintegration into Ukraine extremely complicated.

Conclusion

Hence, it is clear from examining Russia's past deeds, strategic goals, and official narratives why Moscow's aspirations still revolve around control of the Donbas. It has historically represented both industrial might and symbolic identity, and bolstered Russia's long-held conviction that security is guaranteed by territorial expansion. This imperial mentality is maintained by Putin's narrative of defending "oppressed Russians," which uses cultural protectionism to justify violence.

In terms of strategy, the area offers a crucial land route to Crimea and the Black Sea, and strengthens Russia's military reach and ability to project power. Donbas's steel and coal sectors have great economic benefits, but they also come with significant reconstruction expenses and international isolation. In terms of politics and ideology, the Kremlin's hold on power challenges the post-Cold War European order.

Looking ahead, any agreement that gives up the Donbas solidifies a militarized border and widens the rift in Europe. Like the Korean Peninsula, a frozen conflict scenario seems plausible, which denies Ukraine full sovereignty and extends instability.

EPIS