

As Russia’s “special military operation” in the Donbas continues, Lavrov acknowledges the obvious - Russia wants much more than the Donbas



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks & troop locations as of July 21.

As Russia’s war to “liberate” the Donbas in eastern Ukraine grinds on in the region of Donetsk, on Wednesday Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov made it very clear in an interview with RIA Novosti and RT that Russia’s territorial ambitions in Ukraine go far beyond the Donbas and include not only the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, which comprise the Donbas, but also a broad swath of territory extending from Mariupol southward to Kherson near Odesa and the Black Sea and including Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia.

On Feb. 21, President Vladimir Putin convened Russia’s 30-member Security Council to discuss the situation in eastern Ukraine in light of what Russia regarded as the continued refusal of Ukraine to implement the package of measures agreed by the Russian, Ukrainian, French and German leaders at Minsk in February 2015. Those measures, accompanying a renewed ceasefire between Ukraine and the two “People’s Republics” that pro-Russian separatists created in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, involved Ukraine amending its constitution to grant a special status and significant degree of autonomy to the two regions. In those regions, the 2001 census reported that almost 40 percent of the population were ethnic Russians, substantially more than in any other region in Ukraine except Crimea, and roughly 70 percent, far more than in any other region aside from Crimea, identified Russian as their native language.

In the meeting on Feb. 21, the Security Council agreed, in response to appeals from the leaders of the two “People’s Republics” that Russia should recognize their independence and sovereignty and a resolution of the Russian Duma supporting recognition, to recognize their independence and sovereignty. Putin signed executive orders formally recognizing the independence of the two “People’s Republics” as well as treaties of “friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance” with both, and subsequently ordered the deployment of additional troops to the two entities to reinforce the

troops already there. Three days later, Putin announced a “special military operation” in eastern Ukraine to protect the people who “have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime.” The “special military operation” was in fact a full-fledged, multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine from Belarus in the north, Crimea in the south and Russian territory adjacent to eastern and northeastern Ukraine, accompanied by intensive attacks by artillery and missiles on many cities throughout the country. Initially focused not only on eastern Ukraine but also on the Kyiv region, the territory between Kyiv and Kharkiv, and southern Ukraine adjacent to Crimea, in late March, after the attack in the Kyiv region had stalled in the face of strong resistance, Russia shifted the focus of the “special military operation” to eastern Ukraine and proclaimed as its main objective the “liberation” of the Donbas.

After the focus of the “special military operation” shifted to eastern Ukraine, one of the most prominent targets was Severodonetsk, a city of 100,000 (prior to the war) in the Luhansk region. After a prolonged attack on that city, its citizens, and its infrastructure that was reminiscent of its prolonged attack on Mariupol in the southern portion of the Donetsk region, and several weeks of stubborn and courageous defense, in late June the Ukrainian forces withdrew and the Russians quickly moved in. As they did, they turned their attention immediately to Lysychansk, another city of roughly 100,000 (prior to the war) just to the west, on the other side of the Siverskyi Donetsk River. In early July, after defending the city for more than a week, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine announced its forces had withdrawn from Lysychansk, giving Russia control of all of the territory of the Luhansk region. At that point, Russia’s attention turned to several major cities in the Donetsk region west of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk – most notably, Kramatorsk, a city of roughly 160,000 (pre-war) and, ten miles to the north, Sloviansk, a city of roughly 110,000 (pre-war). Meanwhile, as the Russian forces pushed toward those cities and the westernmost portions of the Donetsk region, they also moved toward the city of Zaporizhzhia, extended their control over Kherson and the territory surrounding that city, and moved toward Mykolaiv.

There is already ample evidence in the Luhansk region, the portion of Donetsk region now controlled by Russia, and other regions Russia has taken in eastern Ukraine such as Kherson, that it intends to keep those territories. Russian administrative personnel have taken control of the regions, Russian communications and currency have been introduced, and Russian citizenship has been extended to some of the citizens. In his interview this week, Lavrov made it clear that Russia intends to retain control of the territories it now holds in eastern and southern Ukraine. “Now the geography is different,” he said. “It’s not just Donetsk and Luhansk, it’s Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and a number of other territories.” He attributed the dramatic increase in Russia’s territorial ambitions to the continuing supply by the U.S. and other Western governments of military assistance for Ukraine – most notably, the U.S. HIMARS (the truck-mounted M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems) that have proved to be devastatingly effective. “The West,” he said, “in a desire to maximally exacerbate the situation, have pumped Ukraine with more and more long-range weapons. That means our goal will be to move them back from the current line even further. Because we can’t allow that in that part of Ukraine which will be controlled by [President Volodymyr] Zelensky or whoever replaces him, there were weapons that could present a direct threat to our territory.”

The war to “liberate” the Donbas grinds on. But as Lavrov made clear in his interview, Russia’s territorial ambitions now extend far beyond the Donbas.

David R. Cameron is a professor emeritus and lecturer in political science at Yale.