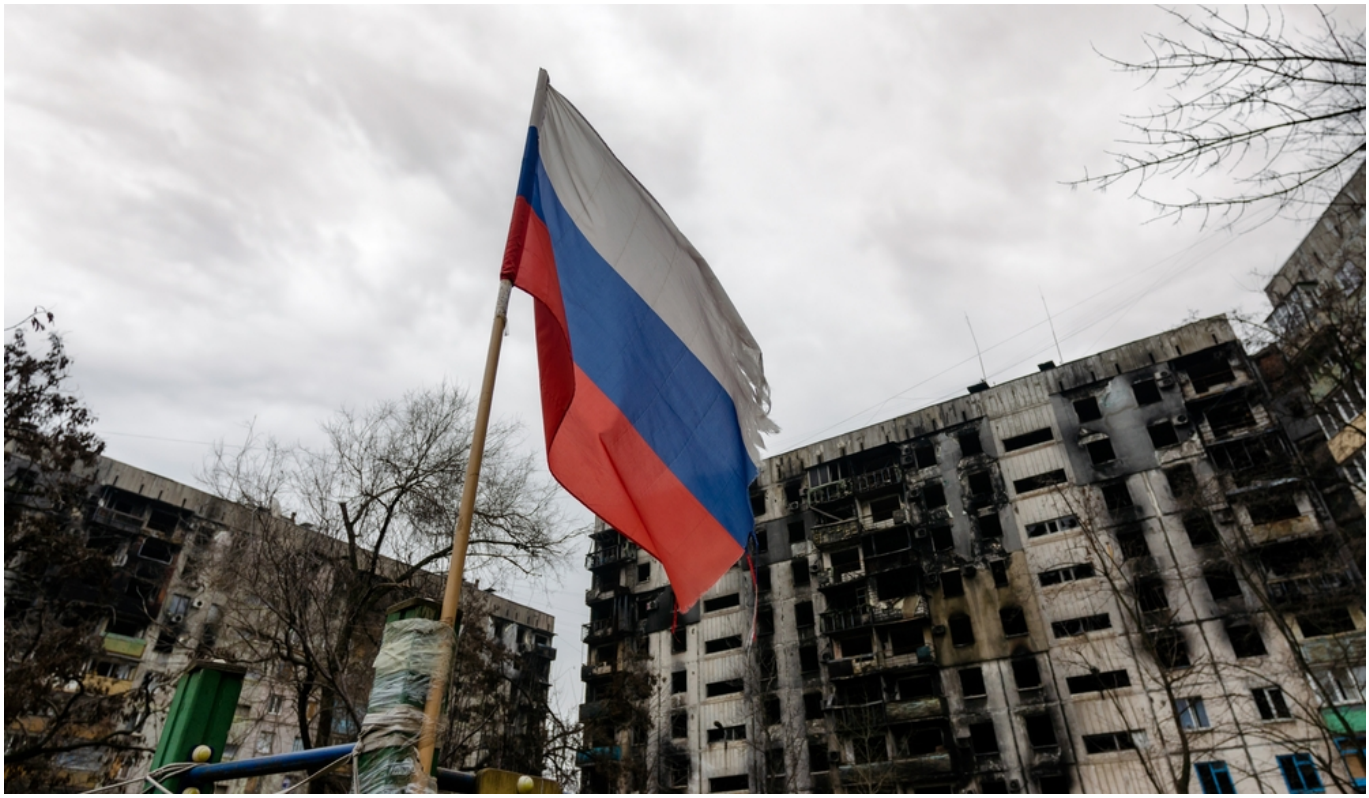
Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Iuliia Mendel, TA Kyiv

Why did Donbas become indispensable to Putin?



A small territory in eastern Ukraine — Donbas — long remained outside the glare of media attention, even within Ukraine itself. Now, it has become one of the most recognisable names across the world.

For twelve years, fighting has churned through its cities and fields, and it is this very territory that Vladimir Putin is said to be demanding as part of a prospective peace deal.

Reports suggest that Russia's proposal would compel Kyiv to "fully withdraw from the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions" in exchange for Moscow's promise to "freeze the front lines in the southern regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia."

In addition, Russia is reportedly willing to return small strips of land captured in Sumy and Kharkiv. If true, this would mean Putin has abandoned his claims to the still-unoccupied areas of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, which Moscow went so far as to inscribe into its Constitution in 2022. Also, under such an arrangement, the number of partly or fully occupied Ukrainian regions would drop from nine to seven.

The stakes could hardly be higher. After more than a decade of war, Donbas has emerged as the core of Putin's bargain with the West—a region he failed to conquer outright, but one he still insists on holding at the centre of any settlement. The world is left asking: what is Donbas, and why has it become so indispensable to the Kremlin?

A portrait of Donbas

Donbas is made up of two regions: Donetsk and Luhansk. Before Russia's invasion, it was home to 6.5 million people—more than two-thirds of London's population, or two and a half times that of Manchester.

The war has emptied Donetsk, displacing nearly 90% of its residents, while in Luhansk most remain trapped under occupation. In 2013, Donetsk and Luhansk ranked first and fifth in Ukraine by industrial output, together accounting for a quarter of the nation's total.

For decades, Donbas was the country's industrial heartland — the centre of Ukrainian metallurgy, one of its two great export engines.

More than 80 plants stood there, shipping steel and finished products to 50 countries. On the strength of this concentration, Ukraine placed tenth in the world in steel production.

The landscape of Donbas is dotted with terikony — artificial mounds of waste rock from coal mining. Most families in the region had ties to mining, comparable to the East and West Midlands in Britain. The region once had 220 mines.

> The region demanded ever greater subsidies, while its major industries fell into the grip of monopolies

After 2014, 97 mines were left in the territories seized by Russia. In 2022, another 11 in newly occupied areas of Luhansk were added to the tally.

Yet in the years since, more than two-thirds have been destroyed. Today, just 16 are known to operate under occupation.

In over 10 years of occupation, Russian companies moved in to lease 15 coal mines. Within months, nine were abandoned — written off as unprofitable, weighed down by global coal prices and the sheer cost of extraction.

Now, Russian businesses try to hand those shuttered shafts back to the occupation authorities.

The mines that once sustained Donbas also made it dependent. The region demanded ever greater subsidies, while its major industries fell into the grip of monopolies.

From this soil came two of the most consequential figures in modern Ukrainian

history: Rinat Akhmetov, the country's richest man, and Viktor Yanukovych, the pro-Russian president who in 2013 tried to construct an autocratic vertical of power and steer Ukraine back toward Moscow.

Yanukovych, himself a product of the coal basin, carried a criminal past and likely owed his electoral victory to fraud. When the Revolution of Dignity began, he fled to Russia; Russian troops soon entered Donbas.

During the full-scale invasion, reports surfaced that Yanukovych was appearing regularly on local Russian television in the occupied areas—a signal, perhaps, that Putin still tests his viability as a political figure in Ukraine.

Survival in the ruins of Donbas

The population of Donbas was overwhelmingly Russian-speaking, a fact Moscow long used as justification for its aggression. Yet the war's destruction of the region has laid bare the emptiness of that claim.

Russian television flooded Donbas with propaganda, but most of its residents chose flight, becoming internally displaced within Ukraine.

Between 2019 and 2021, I travelled to Donbas almost monthly as part of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's team.

People there lived at the edge of poverty, yet strained to maintain the façade of ordinary life. I remember stepping into a kiosk no larger than ten square meters in Mariinka, which was then still under Ukrainian control.

The shelves held only the basics — candy, bread, beer, and chips. I asked the woman behind the counter what she hoped for from Zelenskyy's visit.

"Peace. We are hoping for peace," she said.

In occupied Donetsk today, a bottle of water has become so scarce that it is given as a gift

Today Mariinka is occupied. The last drone footage showed a landscape resembling the end of the world. Already, Putin's inner circle is profiting from the so-called reconstruction of a Donbas reduced to rubble — business, in this case, taking on grotesque forms.

Donbas has lived from crisis to crisis. In occupied Donetsk today, a bottle of water has become so scarce that it is given as a gift, sometimes even alongside flowers.

Social media is filled with accounts of shortages: water flows once every three days, from five to nine in the evening, though rarely for the full four hours, and not always on schedule.

For decades, the region's lifeline was the Siverskyi Donets–Donbas canal, a vast network of pipes, pumping stations, and reservoirs that has come under constant shelling.

In 2024, one strike inflicted such critical damage that even Ukrainian-controlled territories were left facing shortages. The canal could no longer function. Emergency crews began drilling wells and reopening old intakes, with international humanitarian organisations helping cover the costs.

The prize Moscow has never secured

For Vladimir Putin, Donbas has also been a matter of geography. Linking the occupied territories with annexed Crimea offered a shorter and more secure route than crossing through Russia.

More than a year ago, he ordered the creation of a land corridor tying Donetsk to occupied Zaporizhzhia and Crimea. Russian forces repaired the damaged stretches of Ukraine's railway and quickly put it back to use. "In

reality, only Mariupol saw major battles.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy has insisted that he cannot allow the region to be fully occupied, warning that doing so would give Vladimir Putin the chance to "start a third war"

The rest of the line that once connected Donetsk and Crimea remained in working order," recalled Petro Andriushchenko, then an adviser to the mayor of Mariupol.

The political playbook was just as familiar. As in every occupied region, the Kremlin staged referendums, claiming that residents had voted for the formation of two pseudo-republics in Donetsk and Luhansk. Days before the full-scale invasion, Putin signed decrees recognising their independence.

By September 30th, 2022, at the height of the war, he announced the "annexation" of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia—territories seized through military force and validated through sham plebiscites. This manufactured democracy became central to Moscow's attempt to legitimise occupation.

Today, fighting continues across Donbas, with the heaviest clashes around Pokrovsk, a crucial logistical hub. Its fall would push Russian forces to the administrative borders of the Donetsk region, tightening pressure on Ukraine's supply lines and making the evacuation of civilians far more perilous.

Pokrovsk has come to be seen as the gateway — not only to the rest of Donetsk but also to the larger cities beyond, including Dnipro.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has insisted that he cannot allow the region to be fully occupied, warning that doing so would give Vladimir Putin the chance to "start a third war" — another invasion, another push deeper into Ukraine.

And yet, more than a decade into this war, Donbas remains the prize Moscow has sought but never secured.