Information about interviewee:

Georgiy Tuka is the Deputy Minister for Temporary Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons. Interview conducted in Kiev, Ukraine.

R= Respondent – Georgiy Tuka

I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton

## I: Can we start by discussing passportization within the DPR and LPR, I understand that it began by these entities issuing their own documents, as Russian proxy documents, prior to Russia issuing their own documents? Is this the case?

## R: It all started in 2015. When it started it was accompanied by pathetic comments from local media as well as Russian TV channels, but despite this it didn't have a mass character. But when the so-called power entities, When the DPR and LPR were established, they took under their wing the most fragile section of people, mainly teenagers. The just started receiving their passports, and they issued them local passports. The propaganda work was aimed at them. The first step was to issue passports to the militia and local bureaucrats and local power entities, and the army of so-called first and second army corpuses. The second stage was business. In order to have any business on occupied territories, it was mandatory to have a DPR or LPR passport. They were considered equal to a Russian passport.

## I: Since Russia signed a decree simplifying the naturalisation process for those in Donbas, has Russian passportization begun?

## R: It was not a surprise for the Ukrainian side, as our security noted this, and Russia was preparing for this process for half a year at least. According to our information, we have different situations in the realisation of this programme. In Donetsk region, in the occupied part, we can still see queues for people waiting to get a Russian passport. According to our information, the power entities of DPR, on purpose made less points where it is possible to get these passports, to artificially make the queues, to provide propaganda to show this a sign that people eagerly want to get a passport. On Tuesday on the day before yesterday, I met several people on the occupied part of Donbas, they said people do ring their old documents to apply for a passport, but no one has got one yet. In Luhansk, there was a committee and the chief were so-called main person of the LPR. The topic and the main aim of this meeting was the cancelling of this passportization. There were some details named, and if we take the so-called people's militia, and their families, it is 8.5 thousand people. Only 1.3 thousand showed that they wanted to get the passport and only 75 persons gave documents to take the passports. There was an aim given to the local minister of interior, to intensify the work on getting the passports. Also according to the information which the ministry has, on June or July, on the occupied territories of LPR and DPR they want to make a census. They are working closely with the Russian statistical bureau who will actually conduct the census. They have two aims, two goals. The first one, in the administration of two republics, they manipulate with population figures to make them larger, to get more money from the Russian Federation. During this census they are going to make a so-called verification of pensioners. They are going to make it mandatory for elderly to exchange Ukrainian passports for DPR and LPR passports, which can then be exchanged for Russian passports. The initiative is also from Russia. The situation with the elderly is like this, most of them are registered on Ukrainian territory as forced migrants, so once every three months, they come onto Ukrainian territory to get their pension. That region was industrial developed, so the salaries and pensions were always high there. For example of 6000 to 8000 Hryvnias is nothing special, where in Ukraine overall 2 or 2500 is good. But also to show that Russia cares about the Donbas pensioners, every month they get some so-called material help, financial help from the Russian Federation. People call this a Russian pension, but legally it is not a pension, it is just a material thing. It is nearly 2.5 thousand Hryvnias. They don't have enough money for this, the budget is hard to fulfil, so Russia is trying to minimise the expenses, specifically here. And also on the mainland territory of Russia, there are questions raised by people, asking why they are giving so much money to the outer territories when their own people only get 100 dollars. So The Russians want give pensioners a choice: you can stay Ukrainian and get Ukrainian pension or become Russian and get only a Russian pension. In many cases, the families in Ukraine became divided, while the children live and work on Ukrainian territory, their parents live on the occupied territories because they cannot leave their property. After the moment people are forced to take only Russian passports, the chance for them to pass the checkpoints into Ukrainian territories will be closed. Also, they cannot get Ukrainian pensions and medical help because many of them come to Ukrainian territories to go to the hospitals. It is not so easy with Russian pensions as well, most of the people who want to get help with the material help from Russia are elderly, but from our sources in LPR, DPR and in the Russian Federation, to get Russian pension, you need to be registered on the territory of the Russian Federation. But after these people from the DPR and LPR get the Russian passport, they do not get this registration on Russian territory. As my sources say, among the local pensioners there is some confusion, as many of them are trying to sell their flats and property, just for the registration, to move to any region in Russia. The case is that there is an agreement between Russian and Ukrainian pension funds like there is between many countries in the world, that make it impossible for a person to have their pension from two states at the same time. Ukrainian citizens can get their Ukrainian pension only if they are registered on Ukrainian territories. For Russia, it is the same. So we have a position here, that a person gets a Russian passport but are still registered on Ukrainian territory because there is no registration in Russia and LPR and DPR are not Russia territories formally. So there are some panicky feelings among the people in Donbas right now.

## I: Why does Russia use passportization as a tool?

## R: It is a powerful tool for influence and pressure. If you remember the so-called 8-day war in Russia, when it started that it turned out in South Ossetia that suddenly 95% of people had Russian passports and in Abkhazia 80. So Russia could politically motivate their hostile actions towards Georgia, that it just protects Russian citizens. The same in Ukraine in Transnistria and in the Baltic States. In Estonia and Lithuania, it is not so widespread, but in Latvia the situation is pretty bad. Russia has a lot of migrants from the 'Stan' countries, Kyrgyzstan etc. but nobody gives them a chance to get a passport.

## I: How does Russia rectify the paradox, between conducting a supposedly legal and technical process, passportization, while breaking international law with regards to territorial sovereignty infringements to do so?

## R: There are many different paradoxes in Russia. For example, companies that work under Russian law in DPR and LPR, they say that they have special attention from Russian customer care. Because there are sanctions between Ukraine and Russia. For example we have some sanctions against Ukrainian confectionary factories, that make many sweets and meats for example, and we cannot export to Russia. As formally Russia doesn’t' recognise the occupation of LPR and DPR, formally, these plants, that are located on this territory, Russia still considers them to be Ukrainian. So Russian customer care office send the notifications to all the trade networks in Russia, to remove these goods from their shelves, but the fact the factories, in LPR and DPR work for Russian markets, because they have no choice. There are lots of different paradoxes. So despite the LPR, DPR and Crimea, we still have many bilateral decisions that continue, specifically the pensions. So every month, Ukraine gets information from the Russian pension fund, about how many people took Russian pension, in order for Ukraine to stop paying their own pensioners. This paradox and double standards are about passports. Russia openly advertises the ability to obtain Russian passports on the territories of DPR and LPR. But in order to maintain some pretence of norms and rules, they will officially issue the passports not in the LPR and the DPR but in the Rostov region on Russian territory, so the formula is that they give their documents in Luhansk and Donetsk, but they will need to go to the Rostov region. There are two settlements where Russia plans to give the passports, on the territory of Rostov region, here people thought for a long time about how Ukraine should adequately react to these actions. It is clear that Russia will never officially inform Ukraine about who and how they get Russian passports. So there is an idea of sanctions, not to recognise any Russian passports given out in these settlements. It doesn't matter whether it is an ex Ukrainian citizen or a Russian citizen from birth, all the passports which are issued in these two settlements are not formally recognised in Ukraine. The EU and the United States have supported this initiative, so they won't recognise these passports either. This was a lesson learnt from Crimea. When passportization in Crimea started, the EU, the US, and many other countries, said they would not recognise these passports, to give visas or to do any other legal actions if they were given out on Crimea territory. People were unhappy, it was an insult to Russian propaganda, so Russia started issuing passports in Krasnodar region. So logically thinking the EU and the US should ban the passports from Krasnodar region, but there was a bureaucratical issue, in the text of the document was written, just the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Ukraine did it the other way, it just chose not to recognise the passports in certain regions, but the list of locations can change. In one or two-day’s time Ukraine can change the situation easily, so if the passports are given out in Moscow, we can add Moscow to the list, but for the EU and the US to make changes in their documents, it can be a long bureaucratic process which can take years.

## I: What is the goal from Kremlin, the intent or the objective? Are they likely to try and annex Donbas?

## R: They will, but the strategic goal for Putin is not Crimea or Donbas, it is the whole of Ukraine. You do not have to start a full-scale war for this. Soft power instruments are used quite actively. For example in Ukraine, it is quite active. Putin's close relative, Medvedev, says that Kiev that has to have direct conversations with Donetsk and Luhansk.. The same situation was in Transnistria when Russia pressured Moldova to have direct conversation with Tiraspol, and the next day, Russia said 'this conflict is nothing to do with us, it is an internal, domestic issue, we are just peaceful observers there so what kind of sanctions can be towards us?' From one side, Putin wants the same scenario in Transnistria for Ukraine, and that is why they are pushing for this Minsk process, and on the other scenario is to give back Donbas and Luhansk to Ukraine, on the rights of so-called, full autonomy or enlarged autonomy. If the LPR and the DPR have a veto right on any economic or political decision of Ukraine, regarding any foreign policy decision, it means no EU and no NATO. They do not have to make war for this. If Northern Ireland would have the same rights as they are proposed for Donbas, then there would probably not even be a notion of the Brexit case. I have no doubts that the Northern Ireland government would veto the London decision. This is what they have proposed.

## I: Is there a fear in Ukraine that they will continue these practices in other regions in Ukraine?

## R: There is a risk for that. There are risks in the economic field, also in the strategic geo-political field, as Putin desperately needs a land corridor to Crimea. Medvechuk, Putin's proxy, in the last year has been actively developing his political projects and there is a chance, in the Eastern part of Ukraine, where statistically there have been more pro-Russian, again the events that took place in 2014 in Odessa, in Zaparoija, in Hartik. I have no doubt that this scenario is on the table, but whether it will be used, time will tell.

## I: Who deals with the passportization problem except for the Ministry of Temporarily occupied territories?

## R: Well, nobody. Because the law doesn't prohibit it. That's the paradox. Ukraine doesn't recognize dual citizenship, but there is no responsibility for the law violation.

## I: Is that a problem?

## R: Sure it's a problem. A person commits something but has no responsibility for that. Neither MP, nor a taxi driver.