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To cite this article: Anna Matveeva (2016): No Moscow stooges: identity polarization and guerrilla movements in Donbass, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, DOI: [10.1080/14683857.2016.1148415](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1148415)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1148415>



Published online: 25 Feb 2016.



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No Moscow stooges: identity polarization and guerrilla movements in Donbass

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that the grounds for the conflict in Donbass were prepared when different sections of Ukraine's population developed conflicting perspectives of the past, the role of Russia in Ukraine's history, and of how relations with the West should evolve. These differences lay the foundations for what became polarized identities and mutually exclusive ideologies. The study goes on to explore a changing political landscape of a leaderless uprising and formation of a protest movement out of locally available ingredients, the emergence of armed militias in unfolding security vacuum and the developments on the battlefield. As the rebel-held territories drifted away from mainland Ukraine, their new identity was formed by the war. The paper argues that understanding the internal dynamic of the guerrilla war and population's survival has been key to the resolution, which is increasingly unlikely.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 July 2015

Accepted 12 November 2015

KEYWORDS

Ukraine; conflict; identity; Russia; Donbass; rebels; conflict resolution

Conflict in Donbass became a twenty-first century European tragedy whose emergence was overlooked. Much has been said about the involvement of the Russian military in Donbass, although Sakwa (2015) convincingly argues that little is proven in terms of hard facts and that political convictions influence much of the analysis. The paper acknowledges the Russian government's role to be a big issue, but abstains from examining it, concentrating on internal dynamic instead. In fact, too much focus on Moscow runs a risk to obscure the indigenous process.

The paper assesses the developments in Eastern Ukraine from a perspective of polarized identities and a dynamic of conflict escalation in an action – reaction chain prompted by collective insecurities on both sides. In this paradigm, the Maidan events in Kiev that resulted in an extra-constitutional power change triggered, rather than caused, an explosion of the deep societal rifts that had been growing over years and resulted in violent confrontation in Donbass.

Politicization of identity

The events in Donbass can be characterized as an identity conflict. Its ideological and identity-based grounds can be traced back to the Soviet history and early independence years. These grounds were largely overlooked by external policy discourse on the developments in the former USSR because Ukraine was peaceful at the time when tensions flared up elsewhere. Before President Yushenko came to power, most of the society paid little attention to identity differences, and Russian-facing and Polish-facing sides of Ukraine went along with each other (Bremmer 1994). Identity is affiliated more with region rather than ethnicity. Ethnicity is a poor marker in Ukraine, and loyalty and identity are weakly correlated to it. Many people are mixed and members of the same family can have different identities, depending on their formative experiences. Moreover, identity is not a fixed category and can be affected by the pressure of circumstances.

Poll data indirectly confirm that identity is far from straightforward in Ukraine. Survey by Kiev International Sociology Institute shows that in the pre-conflict times, 60–62% identified themselves as monoethnic Ukrainians, 23–25% – as bi-ethnic Ukrainian – Russian, 9–10% – as monoethnic Russians and about 5% – as belonging to ethnic groups.¹ In another survey in 2012, every 10th citizen considered themselves a Soviet person rather than Ukrainian or Russian.²

Identity ingredients are several. People with different identities – Ukrainian monists, Ukrainian pluralists, ‘cultural’ Russians and those politically oriented towards Russia, – lived throughout the country. It is just so that their ratio was different in each region. People of ‘pro-Ukrainian’ orientation existed in the East and in Crimea, but have been in minority there.³ One factor accounting for this situation was movement and intermixing of people during the Tsarist and Soviet eras through state-sponsored political and developmental projects (Kolstoe 1995). It resulted in ethnic Russians settling in Ukraine, while Ukrainians found themselves in the places such as the Far East. Russians and Ukrainians form large minorities in their respective countries: according to 2010 census in Russia, Ukrainians were almost 2 million and amounted to 1.4% of the population of the Russian Federation.⁴

Russians in Ukraine comprise the largest ethnic minority in the country, and their community forms the biggest Russian diaspora in the world. In the last 2001 Ukrainian census, 8334,100 identified themselves as ethnic Russians (17.3% of the population).⁵ Western Ukraine has fewer ethnic Russians than the East and the South, but has its own intermix with Poles, Hungarians, Austrians, Czechs, Slovaks and Romanians. Prior to their incorporation into the Habsburg monarchy, the three regions of Ukraine’s West had disparate political histories – Galicia as part of Poland, Bukovina – of Romania/Moldavia, and Transcarpathia – of Hungary, and did not present a single unit (Himka 1994).

Firstly, the contemporary identities derive from different histories of Ukraine’s populace. The major legacies which left their disparate imprint include the Russian/Soviet system, and Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and Habsburg Austria. Developments during the civil war and the Second World War pitted parts of the country against each other as they joined the opposite sides, and these wounds are far from forgotten. Western regions of Ukraine were incorporated into the USSR in the 1940s, and the armed resistance to Soviet rule subsided only in 1950s (Armstrong 1963; Himka 1994). Even in 1980s, visitors from ‘Russia’ felt uncomfortable there in the Soviet time.⁶ Unsurprisingly, attitude towards the Soviet system seen as ‘Russian’ there was negative and was epitomized by the discourse that presented Ukraine as a victim of Russian colonization. It was first articulated in historical

terms by Ivan Dziuba (Dziuba 1968) and got prominence among liberal national-democratic constituency after independence when re-writing of Soviet history started.⁷

Identity differences existed under surface in the Soviet time, and the authorities were conscious of them, giving concessions to balance them off. For example, a monument to Alexander Pushkin could not be built in a town unless there was also a monument to Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko. On a popular level, while many in the society easily went along with Russians in the USSR, there was a perception in some quarters that an image of an ethnic Ukrainian was derogatory and that Ukrainians were looked down upon by Russians.⁸

Secondly, language is an important identity marker. As Protsyk (2008, 21) notes, ‘debates on the status of the Russian language have been the most politically salient linguistic issue throughout the post-communist period. One indicator of its salience is the frequency with which each issue is raised in the Ukrainian parliament.’ Russians dominated in Central and Eastern Ukraine, and in big cities, while the countryside is more Ukrainian-speaking. At the onset of independence, Russians and other Russian-speaking minorities made up a solid majority in Donbass: 67% in Donetsk and 63% in Lugansk oblasts. Only few of them claimed proficiency in Ukrainian language (Kolstoe 1995, 171).

Policy of ‘Ukrainisation,’ or a state assault to decrease the presence of Russian language in public sphere and in education began in 1990s under the presidencies of Eugenii Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma. Under this policy, schools with the Russian medium of instruction were getting closed. In 1989, 1,058,000 pupils (Russian and Russophone) in Kiev were studying in Russian out of 2,572,000 pupils in the city (Kolstoe 1995).⁹ In 2014, only five schools and one gymnasium remained in Kiev. According to 2001 census, 13.1% of Kiev residents declared themselves ‘Russian’ by ethnic affiliation. In 2004, 4.7% school children studied in Russian, as compared to 22% in 1996.¹⁰

According to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine 2015 data, schools with Russian medium of instruction constituted 47.8% in the academic year 1992, but in the year 2015 they were only 3.5% such schools (excluding Crimea and rebel Donbass). The figures confirm that the main wave of ‘Ukrainisation’ took place under Kravchuk and Kuchma.¹¹

Language policy and a threat to lose access to education in the mother tongue have been of grave concern to Donbass society. It was Yushenko’s presidency who came to power in 2004 that dealt a decisive blow to Russian language in Donbass. In a decade, 2001–2011, the number of Russian language schools in Donetsk oblast reduced from 518 to 176, with the process accelerating since 2004. In 2005, 29.5% of school children of Lugansk oblast studied in Ukrainian, in 2009 they made up 48.5%, although two-thirds of the population considered Russian as their native language. Higher education underwent a similar process. In 2000, 75.7% of university students in Lugansk oblast studied in Russian, but in 2013, they constituted only 37%. In 2001, a decision was made to transfer instruction at the Lugansk Pedagogical Institute from Russian into Ukrainian, and to study Russian as a foreign language.¹²

Still, intelligentsia in Kiev believed that ‘language is not an issue’:¹³ everybody understands Ukrainian even if they prefer to speak Russian. Presumed bi-linguism of the capital prevented Kiev intellectuals to see the real language barrier further east. Gradually, Russian became excluded from public space and individuals had to Ukrainise their name spellings. Since official communication was conducted in Ukrainian, e.g. in courts, those who could not write in it, were gradually wiped out of certain professions, such as law. Language remained an issue of contention even after the adoption of Languages Law in 2012.

Thirdly, organized religion emerged as an arena for identity contestation, since the time when Christian Orthodox church was divided in 1991 into two main administrative cum existential branches¹⁴ – Ukrainian Orthodox Church under Kiev Patriarchy led by metropolitan Filaret, with a minority of parishes, and a larger Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchy headed by metropolitan Onuphrii, to which the majority of Orthodox Christians adhere. Filaret has been an enthusiastic political player since early 1990s and a supporter of both Maidans, who sought to take his church with him. Given its symbolism for the ‘Russian World,’ Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchy stood for the other end of spiritual spectrum, although its involvement in politics started in earnest only after the armed conflict was in full swing.

The most important identity pillar is culture. Creation of nationhood necessitates some sort of a ‘cultural nation’ in the heart of it (Smith 1991). Scholarly discourse in the West urged cultural segregation, e.g.: ‘for Ukraine it is essential to distance itself from Russia and reassert a separate identity (Prizel 1994, 116). This was however difficult, – and in the view of many, unnecessary, – as both high and low culture of Central and Eastern Ukraine has a great deal of commonality with the Russian and often is barely distinguishable. Nikolai Gogol is as much as a Ukrainian as a Russian writer.

Omnipresence of ‘Russianness’ continued after 1991. Independence did not bring a great deal of separatedness, as few barriers in society existed to penetration of the modern Russian culture. The use of Russian language in everyday interaction, cinema and pop culture, open borders, ease of travel and education, business ties, mutually understandable life strategies and prominence of Russian TV channels meant that Russian cultural influence was in abundance throughout independence period and the society was readily absorbing it. As fewer news programmes were available in Russian on Ukrainian TV, it was natural for Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine to watch channels from Russia until they were banned in 2014. Even political ‘West’ of Ukraine did not considerably detach from Russia due to high labour migration.

Role of western Ukrainians in cultural identity-building was significant because they had a culture distinct from the Russian/Soviet one. All post-Soviet ministers of culture originated from Western Ukraine. Thus, a regional culture got promoted as a national to provide a legitimization to the nationhood, but as it was based on pastoral roots of Western Ukraine, it found little resonance in big Russian-speaking industrial cities, socially distant from it.¹⁵

While most of the mainstream society unconsciously went along with closeness to Russia, the minds of politicized intelligentsia were dominated by a sense of cultural vulnerability and artificiality of the new nationhood vis-à-vis the Russian colossus. As Kolstoe predicted already in 1995 (Kolstoe, 180).

Culturally, ... authorities may carry out a linguistic and educational ukrainisation process which proceeds so fast, or goes so deep, that the Russians begin to fear for their cultural identity. This danger is emanating primarily from certain sections of the cultural intelligentsia ... who are bent on turning the political liberalisation of Ukraine into a cultural triumph for ethnic Ukrainians at the expense of other groups.

This was the process taking place over some 20 years, and an attitude towards Russia has become the main identity marker in politicized circles. Holman warned (Holman 1994, 95) that ‘ultimate challenge to Ukrainian sovereignty may be neither military, political or economic. Rather, it seems likely to be cultural, spiritual, and psychological. ... Does their [Ukrainians] contaminated legacy truly divide them from the Russians?’

Politicians share responsibility for polarization. No Ukrainian leader sought to create a unified national identity, instead basing their credentials on either Eastern or Western orientation. A move towards 'Ukrainisation' under Leonid Kravchuk in the 1990s was understandable, reflecting a common trend in ex-Soviet republics to promote their nationhood. However, this alienated those citizens who did not feel the need for cultural separation from Russia and felt disaffected by Kravchuk's strident anti-Russian escapades.

Vote for Leonid Kuchma and promised language and cultural concessions reflected that. Kuchma's efforts were inconclusive and some key promises were not kept, but attitudes softened and a default consensus emerged.

2004 Orange Revolution, or the first Maidan, emphasized divisions along identity lines. National-democratic intelligentsia got in demand under Yushenko, as identity politics occupied public space, manifested by erection of monuments to controversial Ukrainian historical figures such as Stepan Bandera, renaming of street names, introduction of new national celebrations and other symbols. Under Yanukovich, identity contestation continued, but two discourses to an extent counterbalanced each other. While intellectuals largely grouped around Ukraine-centred national-democratic camp, ruling politicians promoted an independent Ukrainian statehood with a cultural closeness to Russia.¹⁶

A large role in identity rift was played by politicized intelligentsia who got enthusiastically involved in asserting nationalist superiority long before the 2nd Maidan. Anti-Russian discourse became fashionable among liberal elite. Media, think tanks and expert community acquired a loud voice in articulating it, regardless of how representative their views were for the country as a whole. It was hard to make a career in Ukrainian intellectual milieu speaking for the Eastern identity and interests, as accusations of being a 'Kremlin agent' could easily follow.¹⁷ Although numerically small, this constituency was vocal and tended to dominate public discourse even before the events of 2013.

Later 'Russia' was identified with president Putin as a quintessential 'Russian,' as obsession with his personality overshadowed a rational analysis of Russian policy among 'national-democratic' experts. Identity split culminated in the Second Maidan which had a passionate anti-Russian streak. Protests caused bewilderment in Russia where few took the Customs Union and Moscow's integrationist demeanour seriously. The idea that somebody would feel an existential passion on its behalf seemed absurd. Simple explanation was that the West steered Ukrainians against the Russians and that 'the West will fight Russia until the last Ukrainian.'

Identities at war

Gap widened as a result of turbulent events of 2013–2014, when many who preferred not to make identity choices, were forced into ones. Conflict in the East provided a useful peg for Kiev politicians to hang a new national idea on and became a creation myth with its heroes and history in the making. In this paradigm, Donbass violence is interpreted not as a civil conflict in Ukraine, or a counter-insurgency operation which went wrong, but as a war between Ukraine and Russia. No expression of dissent is tolerated in liberal circles on such core beliefs as victory over 'terrorists,' attitude towards Russia or a status of the Russian language. Large pro-war support has been prominent among Kiev middle class and especially among café-dwelling politicized intelligentsia, media, think tanks and universities (Gessen 2014). After Maidan, civil society in large measure became a warring party, and a

war culture got trendy. Rather than giving peace a chance, liberal consensus was that cease-fires were not a road to peace but a lull in fighting to better prepare to win the next round.

Cultural segregation which used to be implied before, became a legitimate pursuit. In July 2014, Russian films, including 'White Guard' based on Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, got banned.¹⁸ As stated by Alexander Roitband, a famous Ukrainian artist-turned-ideologue, 'Russian literature and music should not be banned, but I made a revision of Russian literature for my own sake. I understand that what we encountered is in large part the consequence of Russian culture.'¹⁹ In this paradigm, demolition of Lenin monuments in 2014 reflects substitution of 'Soviet' for 'Russian.' Onslaught against Soviet-era symbols characteristic of 1990–1991 period in Russia can be interpreted as disguised attempt to distance from Russian cultural and social heritage, identified with Sovietism, though this is historically not true.

History was dealt a blow by the political regime supported by media: in May 2015 laws were adopted ordering to dismantle Soviet monuments within six months and wipe out Communist-era public place names. Over 20 cities and thousands of settlements were to be renamed.²⁰ Religion joined battleground. At first, Ukrainian Church under Moscow Patriarchy abstained from an involvement into politics and gave its support to Ukrainian army. This shifted in spring 2015 when Church hierarchs remained seated while Anti-Terrorist Operations' (ATO) heroes were commemorated.²¹ Tone was set by Patriarch Kirill, Head of Moscow Patriarchy, who stated in reference to Ukraine that 'when godlessness becomes state ideology, and people die and churches are ruined as a result, this is more than ideology.'²²

After the 2nd Maidan, process of identity-formation has been taking place on an anti-Russian basis and a Ukrainian style of patriotism linked to past struggle against Russian/Soviet Empire. As put by Igor Semyvolos,

Process of destruction of a Soviet identity is happening as a destruction of Russian one and deconstruction of 'Russianness.' *Cultural* ties with Russia are disrupted, not only political ones. Russians inflicted a great humiliation upon us, and we should have satisfaction.

Pluralism in these matters becomes extinct. Left has been discredited and barely has a voice in legitimate public discourse. Emotive and aggressive public rhetoric means that voices of dissent are silenced not by the state, but by 'civil society.' Mikhail Pogrebinskii, director of Political and Conflict Studies Centre lamented that Elena Bondarenko was hounded on live TV when a *Svodoba Slova* programme gave her airtime for once: 'they are representatives of civil society. Do they have any arguments, or only hysterical insulting shouts? And all of this are civic-minded activists, our civil society.'²³

Speaking for an Eastern – interpreted as 'pro-Russian' – identity can be politically and personally dangerous. In January – April 2015, eight former officials with pro-Eastern leanings committed suicide under dubious circumstances; one – Oleg Kolesnikov – was gunned down in Kiev, as well as a prominent journalist Oles' Busina.²⁴ Many among those who adhered to an 'Eastern' orientation, emigrated, and others have not been seen on TV talk shows and lost access to mainstream Ukrainian media. Sergei Sukhobok was another journalist found dead at the same time. In the words of Pogrebinsky,

Nowadays, – because of different reasons, including winners' cruel joy, – those forces which openly and frankly state that they are oriented towards rapprochement with Russia, are denied access to political life. Since the beginning of Maidan everything was moving in that direction. This is why it is unsurprising that at present such people do not get an adequate and full right

to political participation, and if somebody of this kind appears, they are immediately being pressurised into silence. They state that if you do not consider Russia an enemy, then you are an enemy yourself and should be dealt with, and this is a very dangerous situation.²⁵

A sense of triumphalism reigns in among those who feel that the tide is in their favour. For example, in the words of a Kiev expert, Russian-oriented participants of an international dialogue project from Kiev ‘are hiding like jackals.’ This sentiment is echoed in the West: a Chatham House meeting proclaimed that ‘toxic public figures, such as Medvedchuk and the like, are shut down.’²⁶ Apart from being morally dubious, this attitude can be detrimental in the country where different identity orientations continue to exist. If they could not be articulated in a legitimate political discourse, they will come out by other means.

A forward-looking perspective presenting an alternative to the Russian World is the idea of European integration based on ‘democratic/civilisational’ values. Distancing from Moscow is considered as an essential prerequisite for progress down the European path. Pavel Gaidutsky, director of Strategic Assessments Institute, wrote in June 2013 saying that ‘in European direction, civilisational values have a much higher priority for Ukraine over the economic ones, than on Eurasian direction.’²⁷ Popular attitudes towards Eurointegration were influenced by the ‘values’ aspect rather than economy, and reflected distinct identities of the West and the East. In 2013, EU integration was supported by 72.2% in the West and by 20.7% in the East, where 50.4% supported integration into the Customs Union.²⁸

‘National – democratic’ elites have not formed a coherent national project aimed at Europe during the 2nd Maidan period. ‘European’ discourse has been unstructured and subject to interpretation in the light of political views. Integration can be understood as building effective institutions in law, politics and social relations, and overcoming the Soviet legacy and history of incorporation into the Tsarist Russia. ‘We have a very negative example – Russia, a place we want to leave, push back from.’²⁹ A related view is that European choice is a move away from participation in Eurasian geopolitical projects and a reaction to a vacuum in indigenous designs.³⁰ Tolerance to diversity, pluralism and respect for minority interests do not feature prominently in ‘European vision.’ Main pillars are anti-corruption, i.e. nomination of Western appointees in charge of key positions, prosecution of corrupt officials of Yanukovich era, visa-free travel and access to the EU, salaries and social guarantees *on par* with ‘old Europe,’ and a financial package: ‘if the West does not want to fight for us, let it at least pay.’³¹

Vision had little realism on how feasible these goals are in short-term perspective, and in 2015 came under criticism by opposition politicians, such as Victor Medvedchuk, leader of Ukraine’s Choice, as a ‘myth’ based on an unrealistic foundation.³²

Donbass: conflict gestation

A fear of being swept up by Ukrainian nationalism is not new in Donbass. It gripped society in the East in 1991 when the Soviet Union was heading towards disintegration, but Kravchuk election calmed the situation down (Prizel 1994). Still, in 1993 ‘Movement for the Rebirth of Donbass demanded a restructuring of the Ukrainian state on federal lines, the elevation of Russian to the status of second state language and closer integration for Ukraine into the Commonwealth of Independent States’ (Kolstoe, 189). Population of the South–East, – which includes Donbass, – showed weak associate with new statehood. A July 1994 poll returned data that 47% of respondents would have voted against independence of Ukraine

if a referendum was conducted at the time, and 24% would have voted 'yes' in it (Kutsenko 1997).³³ In 1994, oblast councils conducted referenda on making Russian a second state language and on federalization of the country (Vlasov and Popovkin 1997, 154)

Fears resurfaced in 2004 when protest rallies took place in the region in response to the Orange Revolution in Kiev. As a reaction to the first Maidan victory, grassroots initiatives flourished. An anti-Maidan Congress was held in Severodonetsk in November 2004 under Yanukovich chairmanship. Denis Pushilin, a future DNR leader, established his Novorossiia NGO in 2005. A memorandum between Yushenko and Yanukovich in 2005 put an end to nascent tendency of Donbass' distancing itself from Kiev, but federalization debate surfaced on and off in 'Orange' period. Donetsk-based elite was the main driving force behind the federalization agenda (Protsyk 2008).

2014 Maidan events unleashed strong fears throughout south-eastern Ukraine that victorious nationalists would move to stamp out their way of life. A wave of pro- and anti-Maidan rallies opposing each other swept through eastern and southern Ukraine. Rada's move to abolish Law on Languages targeting use of Russian (International Crisis Group 2014) prompted concern that Donbass communities would be forced to accept an interpretation of history and cultural symbols that they did not share, and which were alien to them.

According to Research & Branding poll in December 2013, 81% of population in Donbass did not support Maidan.³⁴ Speed and ease of Yanukovich's downfall shocked the region. It feared that it would be scapegoated as a backbone of old regime, which inflicted casualties on protestors in Kiev, whom they will come to avenge upon: 'they will finish with *Berkut* in Kiev and come to get us' was commonly said. As salaries were higher in Donbass, many suspected that they would be squeezed to subsidize poorer Western regions, who won at Maidan. Rumours circulated that a 'special toll' will be levied for 'Maidan needs.' Widely televised instances of unruly behaviour of Right Sector and thuggish groups³⁵ conveyed worrying signals to the East.

At this point, the conflict dynamic escalated in an action–reaction process in which each side came to see the other as an existential threat. Anti-Maidan activists in Donbass believed that the region should be prepared to defend itself from nationalist militias, but could not rely on central apparatus for protection. Security sector was in disarray and many commanders were distrustful of new authorities. Their local branches either sympathized with anti-Kiev side because they shared their sentiments, or sought to keep distance to support eventual winner. Senior officers were Yanukovich-era appointees and were afraid that they would follow *Berkut's* fate.

Each action or posture taken by the rebel side served to heighten the fears of Kiev government, the main one being disintegration of the country and further losses. After Crimea, which Kiev surrendered with almost no fight, it watched the same mechanics underway in eight other regions of the South-East. It seemed that not only Donbass, but Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Kherson, Zaporozhie and Odessa might seek to separate. In April, when Slavyansk and Kramatorsk fell into hands of rebels and uprisings sparked in other cities, Kiev responded with a large-scale 'anti-terrorist operation' (ATO). Rada's speaker Oliksandr Turchynov announced that 'we're not going to allow Russia to repeat Crimean scenario in Ukraine's East.'³⁶ Kiev escalated the conflict by declaring the other side 'terrorists,' with whom no talks could be held, instead of negotiating a solution.

Formation of rebel forces

A violent protest movement does not solve anything without formation of military units. Prompted by Maidan events, in March–April 2014, local conflict entrepreneurs emerged to mobilize identity fears and create armed capabilities out of volunteers, mercenaries and remnants of security personnel. Altogether, they put together an assortment of guerrilla forces in the spirit of Spanish Civil War, with no uniforms and a patchy collection of weapons. Military hostilities and the first losses fostered the resolve to resist, achieving the opposite effect as intended by Kiev. Rebel sources estimate that outside volunteers comprised about 20% and the rest were from Ukraine. Call signs which the guerrillas invented – Motorola, Dushman, Demon, Lynx, Gypsy, Gloomy, Contra – and by which they became famous reflected spirit of a free guerrilla and were an image booster for them. Number call signs appeared later when a command-and-control structure emerged.

As demand for small arms appeared in March, they found their way into Donbass and armaments left from the Second World War were also used (Ferguson and Jenzen-Jones 2014). Some were brought from Russia, some apprehended from Ukrainian arsenals and the military, and others were procured on black market after arsenals in Western Ukraine were raided by Yanukovich opponents.³⁷ As war progressed, military vehicles were seized by rebel groups from Ukrainian side.³⁸

Tensions between groups and the way they aligned themselves were evident from the start. In Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), apart from Strelkov's force in the north, several guerrilla battalions were formed down south, headed by men of Donbass origin. *Oplot* was established in January 2014 as an anti-Maidan group in Kharkov by Yevgeniy Zhilin and later became a battalion led by Alexander Zakharchenko, future DNR premier. On 16 April, 20 *Oplot* activists occupied Donetsk city council to demand a referendum on the region's status. *Oplot* was a reasonably well-behaved force from the start as compared to some overtly unruly groups, and had helped to release hostages and abductees from detention.

Vostok battalion was headed by Alexander Khodakovsky, a former Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU) Alpha commander, with its core made up of ex-members of Ukraine's special branch. *Vostok* made its first public appearance at 9 May Victory Day parade in Donetsk numbering up to 500 men. *Vostok* controlled, together with *Oplot*, Donetsk, Snezhnoe and Shakhtyorsk until 9 July 2014, when Khodakovsky argued with Strelkov who arrived to Donetsk from Slavyansk. This resulted in splitting of *Vostok* with one part going to Makeevka, and other joining Strelkov. Battalion of Igor Bezler (call sign *Bes*) controlled Gorlovka and partially Makeevka. Bezler was originally of Crimea's German descent, but lived in Gorlovka before the conflict.

Crucial role in formation of armed resistance was played by DNR 'minister of defence' Igor Strelkov (*nom de guerre*). A Russian citizen, he fought in Transdnestria and the Caucasus, was a history graduate and an active journalist. Strelkov injected a degree of military organization in the areas where he was present and organized a 'Slavyansk brigade' numbering 4000–6000 fighters at its height. There were also autonomous militias whom Strelkov did not command. Technically, he was a DNR forces commander, but some Lugansk militias' aligned with him rather than with Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) leadership.

As war progressed, other battalions rose to prominence out of smaller units. *Somali* headed by Mikhail Tolstykh (call sign *Givi*) got famous for fighting in Ilovaysk and Donetsk airport. It got its name because when fighters lined up for the first time, they were dressed in

all manner of civilian clothes, such as shorts and trainers, did not look like a combat force, and, in their view, resembled Somali pirates. *Sparta* emerged in Donetsk from *Motorola*'s unit (call sign of Arsenii Pavlov, a Russian citizen) of Slavyank brigade. *Kalmius* battalion named after the river was set up in late June by staff and miners of Donetsk Metallurgic Factory. It was headed by different commanders and became known for its fighting at Saur-Mogila and Debaltsevo.

LNR evolved along a similar trajectory. Valerii Bolotov, LNR's first head, on 6 April led an armed seizure of SBU premises in Lugansk. Lugansk uprising suffered from proliferation of groups dispersed throughout the oblast who did not recognize overall command. Oblast had a large Cossack volunteer presence under Nikolai Kozitsyn who was based in Anratsy and under Pavel Dremov, both being a law in themselves. Main LNR battalions were *Zarya* commanded by Igor Plotnitsky, later LNR premier; *Batman* established by Alexander Bednov (call sign *Batman*) and *Leshii* (Goblin) led by Alexei Pavlov.³⁹

Prizrak (Ghost) occupied a special space both inspirationally and as a capable combat force, and operated outside of LNR command. It was set up in Stakhanov and later based in Alchevsk. *Prizrak* was headed by Alexei Mozgovoi from Svatovo (Donbass). It got its name because the group survived a bombing, in which Ukrainian sources reported members killed, thus they became 'ghosts.' *Prizrak* has developed into a large battalion, had a stream of international volunteers, and a French–Serbian unit. Early on, Mozgovoi conflicted with Bolotov in Lugansk and left for Lysychansk to avoid confrontation. In May 2014, *Prizrak* allied with Strelkov's overall command and their units were stationed together in Siversk in Artyomovskii district.

Rebel cause's international appeal

Events in Ukraine gave 'Russian World'⁴⁰ a huge boost and it acquired its first heroes. As local uprising was gaining momentum, it inspired a strong identity movement in Russia known as *Russkaya Vesna* (Russian Spring).⁴¹ In chaotic conditions, solidarity-driven volunteers of all kinds from Russia have been flocking to Donbass in spring 2014. Some had military background, such as off-duty and reserve personnel recruited through the Union of Russian Officers and Russian Union of Afghanistan War Veterans, but many did not even serve in the army and had to be taught how to shoot. They were right-wing nationalists, monarchists, spiritual heirs of 'White Russia', ultra-leftists, National-Bolsheviks.

Cossack volunteers were recruited via the Union of Cossack Forces of Russia and Abroad, but anybody could claim a Cossack ancestry and join the fight regardless. 'Chechen volunteers' have been visible among rebel ranks. Apart from ethnic Chechens, they include other North Caucasians and various 'others' who fought in Chechen wars (Memorial 2014). Some among initial fighters were believed to be mercenaries paid by Yanukovich and recruited through dubious structures such as 'Russian Orthodox Army' and football ultras.⁴¹

Apart from creating an appeal in Russia, Donbass acquired a global resonance as an US/ Russia proxy war,⁴² in which Ukraine came to symbolize a contestation of globalized identities. Donbass conflict is less territory-bound than other post-Soviet cases and amounts to more than a struggle for a geographically defined ethnic homeland. Its open-endedness created a solidarity appeal for foreign fighters other than from Russia who were motivated by ideological causes, such as anti-Atlanticism, resentment of western hypocrisy, double

standards and a sense of moral superiority. Guardian cites, for example, a desire ‘to stand against western imperialist aggression.’⁴³

Rebel websites report and post video footage of great diversity of international fighters, who are faced by volunteers fighting for Kiev.⁴⁴ Caucasians can be found on both sides of conflict divide, as well as Russian nationalists (Yudina and Al’perovich 2015). A Chechen diaspora network organized by Issa Munaev from the Netherlands recruited volunteers who at times faced their ethnic kin on battlefield.⁴⁵

Parallels between Donbass guerrillas and Spanish Civil War can be drawn. Both were motivated by ideological causes, and started as spontaneous uprisings in which outside volunteers played a key role in awakening indigenous protests. Both movements saw their struggles as ‘anti-fascist,’ combating fascism formed major ideological pillar and influenced rhetorics. Romanticism of anti-fascist resistance brought cultural and creative figures into ranks of guerrilla fighters. Many volunteers in Spain and Donbass were civilians who had to master combat skills on the spot. Military advisers from the USSR/Russia have been present in both cases, and conservative Western media wrote about a large presence of Soviet troops in Spain at the time. *Drygaia Rossia* volunteer movement in Donbass established by Russian writer Eduard Limonov claims to be the heir of Spanish International Brigades.⁴⁶

Here comes a local guy: political landscape of ‘people’s republics’

Second Maidan opened a window of opportunity unthinkable since the end of the USSR as changing borders suddenly appeared possible. Grievances against Kiev combined with a misplaced expectation that Moscow’s handling of Crimea’s situation would be mirrored in Donbass generated a requirement for political action. Referenda were organized on 11 May 2014 in DNR and LNR with a ‘yes or no’ question: ‘Do you agree with the Act on *самостоятельность* of DNR/LNR?’ Chosen term was elusive: it could imply independence, but could mean ‘self-rule’ or ‘sovereignty.’ In practice, most people who voted expected a quick Russian takeover, troops’ deployment and Moscow taking care of them. As it became apparent that Kremlin was in no hurry to do that, insurgency had to find its own way in politics. Direction of travel rather than an end picture influenced evolution of the movement.

Conflict in Donbass is distinct from other post-Soviet conflicts, as it was leaderless and not spearheaded by elite, thus questioning centrality of an elite bargain concept to understanding the issues of conflict and violence (de Waal 2008). Instead of benefitting elites, the conflict created a political vacuum for civil society to act, even if in violent and extreme form when it started to believe that power was in its own hands. In an absence of recognized politicians, the conflict witnessed local entrepreneurs as frontline actors who fostered mobilization in what used to be an atomized political environment. As uprising fought its way, survived and got entrenched, it led to what Cheng calls a formation of ‘conflict capital’ (Cheng *forthcoming*). However, despite identity and ideological commonality, DNR and LNR do not wish to integrate into one entity, as both established their own power-holding and political structures.

While in another post-Soviet conflict in Transdnistria in 1992, uprising was led by regional leadership backed by its industrial elite, Donbass establishment was not interested in the rebellion, but keen to secure their assets and profits. Regional elite quickly got into disarray, some were discredited and fled, others were not prepared to go all the way towards an open confrontation. Those former ruling Party of Regions MPs, such as Nikolai Levchenko

who initially supported rebel cause, but distanced from it, were seen as disloyal by both sides. Those who moved to Kiev and expected to come back, found themselves out of place.

Regional elite played their cards badly, and the old politics/ business network was quickly dismantled. Ex-head of the Party of Regions parliamentary faction oligarch Alexander Yefremov, former Lugansk governor, was put on trial in Kiev for his role in adoption of '16 January' laws restricting civil freedoms. Sergei Taruta, another oligarch and Donetsk ex-governor, learnt about his removal from the presidential speech announcing his successor. Alexander Lukyanchenko, a mayor of Donetsk, left with an untarnished reputation only to join the officials-in-exile club struggling to maintain relevance. Former Lugansk mayor Sergei Kravchenko was less fortunate as he was detained by Ukrainian Aidar volunteer battalion as he attempted to leave for Russia. Aidar also abducted the Severodonetsk mayor.

Exception among elite losers was Rinat Akhmetov, formerly Ukraine's wealthiest man with assets in steel and mining. At the beginning of the conflict, he found himself with a Hobson's choice. Unlike rebel leadership, Akhmetov had a lot to lose from EU sanctions. Had he sided with the rebels, he risked asset seizure in the West and a travel ban. If he turned against armed groups, they would have destroyed his productive capabilities. By squaring the circle, Akhmetov secured a place in Kiev while his assets in Donbass continued functioning, albeit damaged. Their production is exported through Ukraine, which presumes a degree of cooperation between both sides.⁴⁷ Oligarch enjoys respect in the region because he has been the main provider of humanitarian aid on both sides throughout the conflict. Some rebels remained on reasonable terms with him.

As elites made themselves scarce, a Mr. Common Guy came to replace wealthy power-holders. Insurgents were local men, poorly educated and often unruly, with a background in private security, skilled labour, small business; and low-level administrators. None were professional middle class. The only person with a recognizable political career is Lugansk mayor Manuvis who used to be a deputy mayor before the conflict. LNR's Bolotov at one point was Lugansk governor's driver and reportedly had dealings in petty 'grey mining' business.⁴⁸ Alexei Mozgovoi was a local singer and performed in a club in Svatovo. Bezler for a while worked in a funeral parlour, and *Givi's* last job was at a factory and before that – of a lorry driver.

As the conflict escalated in spring, local insurgents were supplemented by figures from Russia, who had more political experience, were better educated, well-spoken and with foreign travel, but few got rooted in Donbass. Strelkov's withdrawal was orchestrated by Moscow, but several others left out of own volition, either influenced by war fatigue, unable to take atrocities or because of disagreements with local guerrillas. In August, a new wave of indigenous commanders from among original fighters replaced Russian outsiders. They were the leaders who came from the conflict milieu, with personal charisma and battlefield reputations being their distinguishable characteristics.

Kremlin exercised certain influence on internal politics, but Moscow's role was not the key variable. Control was projected through supplies of humanitarian and 'non-humanitarian' aid, provision of training, pointed management interventions by 'polite men', when locals were not coping with civilian functions, and bringing in main figures to Russia for 'consultations' and political education. Efforts have been made by Moscow to help promising commanders to evolve into political figures, soften the stance of radical warlords who could act as spoilers and take them out of Donbass, if necessary, such as it happened to Bolotov and Bezler. Tap of military supplies switched on and off to individual commanders, depending on

whether they fell into line. Moscow tried to oversee financial side of its assistance. Vladimir Putin indirectly acknowledged presence of a number of Russian servicemen in Donbass.⁴⁹

Crucially, the conflict fostered development of political personalities of 'people's republics' amidst societal mobilization around resistance. Necessity to build nascent governance arrangements on rebel-held territories was realized fairly early on. Rebels established separate entities, which were loosely united into a 'Novorossiia' confederation to hold a joint front vis-à-vis Kiev and Moscow.⁵⁰ Term was first used by Count Potemkin under Catherine the Great for the current southern and eastern Ukraine and means 'New Russia.' Novorossiia idea did not presuppose joining Russia, but was a kind of a new beginning. Some rebels were saying that they were not interested in Russia's geopolitical projects, but in Donbass' future. However, soon the efforts to develop Novorossiia were put on hold following the Minsk-1 agreement (September 2014) and Kiev's offer of a 'special status' to the territories.

Movement's political goals were diffused. Some, such as Khodakovskiy and Oleg Tsarev, chair of Novorossiia parliament, supported the idea of a united and pro-Russian Ukraine, into which Donbass could fit in.⁵¹ Other commanders were sceptical that this option was viable, feeling that pro-Russian constituency in mainland Ukraine has diminished, while anti-Russian sentiment has gripped hearts and minds. Then, political survival and management of unpredictability loomed large and sidelined the end goal, and no certainty existed what the battle was for. However, the longer the fight progressed, the more field commanders got convinced that they fight for outright independence.

Politically, movement has a strong anti-oligarch streak: oligarchs should not be involved in politics and 'mind their own business.' It is a kind of a 'revolution from below' because it has an aspiration for political change beyond one's cultural identity and a socio-psychological power of moral impulse. Grounds for this political agenda were already laid when the elites abandoned the region and ordinary people were left to fend for themselves. Leftist values, i.e. social justice, power to people at local level, rebuilding Donbass on an egalitarian basis and anti-elitism form its key pillars. In Mozgovoi's words: 'Novorossiia be! Oligarchs out. Power to genuine, ordinary people. This is our chance in many decades to build a fair, human and humane state.'⁵²In this, Novorossiia ideology had commonality with Maidan.

What makes them different is the attitude towards 'Russian World' which is a source of inspiration for rebels. It conveys a sense of belonging to larger historic, political and cultural community, bringing them to the imagined roots of the pre-revolutionary Russia. Christian Orthodox faith, traditional values, Russian language and treacherous image of the West are main pillars of socially conservative ideology. In the words of a DNR leader Pavel Gubarev: 'we aspire to a new social model based on Russian civilisational identity and fair political order.'⁵³Thus, identity politics became reconfigured to produce something bigger than a mere desire to shake off Kiev's rule.

It is interesting to see what happens when a leaderless militancy succeeds. Structure of movement remained horizontal and non-hierarchical until the republics organized elections on 2 November 2014. Moscow had a hand in their script. In the absence of parties, local legislatures were elected by direct vote from among competing public associations. In DNR, 16-year-olds were made eligible to vote, – a provision inspired by Scottish referendum, – while the age stayed at 18 at LNR. Over a million people were reported to have voted in DNR and 700,000 in LNR, including volunteer fighters from outside. Three polling stations for refugees were organized in Russia. DNR elected 100 deputies and LNR – 50 to their councils. Two electoral blocs crossed 5% barrier in each republic.⁵⁴

Elections of republics' heads turned into confidence votes for Zakharchenko (79%) and Igor Plotnitsky (63%) identified by Kremlin as the most suitable candidates. Igor Bezler who tried to enter the race, was lured out of DNR and kept in Russia. LNR experienced tensions with commanders being blocked from participation: one electoral list was registered only after a tank was brought in and took an aim at an electoral commission.

Although wartime elections could hardly be free and fair, they conveyed internal legitimacy to Donbass leadership and facilitated their evolution into political figures. Kiev's and Western criticism of the elections lacks consistency. An argument could be constructed that Poroshenko's own election was illegitimate given that Yanukovich's victory in 2010 was recognized by OSCE ODIHR as 'free and fair'⁵⁵ and he was forced out of office by unconstitutional means. Consequently, Donbass elections were legitimate in the eyes of some, but illegitimate for others, for whom the question of legitimacy became a barrier rather than an enabling factor.

Rebels found out that nothing was more difficult than supervising an insurgency because it was territorially dispersed. Differences between more industrialized and urbanized DNR and more disparate LNR influenced how their respective powerholding shaped. DNR had a more coherent military command from the start installed by Strelkov, while in LNR, at least three centres contested power. This tendency at LNR continued into 2015, when Cossacks dominated Alchevsk, and Chechens were influential in Antratsiy and Sverdlovsk.

Chaotic situation rich on internal conflicts was rampant after initial idealism subsided and values suffered reduction to reality. Guerrillas periodically locked each others in dungeons. Efforts were made to bring unruly regiments in line, sometimes by coercive means when attempts to make them comply failed.⁵⁶ High-profile assassinations of autonomous commanders known to oppose Minsk agreement were more typical for LNR. *Batman*, a champion of Lugansk city defence, was gunned down in January 2015, for which LNR leadership took responsibility. On 23 January Yevgenii Ishenko, mayor of Pervomaïsk and a Cossack Guard commander, was killed, and the year ended with Cossack leader Pavel Dremov murder.

The most prominent was assassination of Alexei Mozgovoi on 23 May 2015, following previous attempts. Although an obscure Ukrainian group took responsibility, many believed in internal causes. DNR had fewer such incidents. *Mirage* battalion commander Roman Voznik (call sign *Tsygan*) was assassinated in Donetsk on 26 March and there were several non-fatal attempts on prominent commanders, such as *Givi*. Efforts to make 'wild battalions' a thing of the past were ongoing. On 30 March, separatist authorities ordered those who did not belong to formal armed structure to forfeit all their weaponry or face criminal charges (UN OHCHR 2015b).

After a year and a half of separatism, attitudes towards leaders who came on top are not uniform, but they have a fair degree of popular support. According to October 2015 poll in DNR, 65% trust DNR head Zakharchenko and 50% trust Donetsk mayor Martynov.⁵⁷

Battlefields

Neither side expected a full-scale war, until they gradually slid down into one. ATO was ordered as a joint operation of SBU and Interior Ministry, but fighting was of low intensity until May 2014 when Poroshenko came to power and conflict intensified. Heavy weapons and aviation were deployed, and mass casualties followed. At the ATO start, Ukrainian

armed forces have been in the similar state as was the Russian army in 1994 when President Yeltsin invaded Chechnya (Lieven 1998).

Numerically stronger and better armed, Ukrainian side seized several industrial cities from the rebels in July. When the frontline moved to the main urban agglomerations, positional warfare began. The Ukrainian side was unable to storm cities and instead shelled them with heavy artillery from outside. At first, Ukrainian side also used air power to bomb urban targets, but after rebels' air defence capabilities strengthened and some 20 aircraft and military helicopters were lost, this practice stopped.⁵⁸

In August, Kiev projected a message that a military victory was days away, but rebels' counteroffensive in late August resulted in a disastrous defeat, with several battalions trapped in cauldrons, and almost annihilated at Illovaysk. Starobeshevo cauldron on 30 August set a pattern of surrender of military vehicles in exchange for safe passage out. Vehicles, weapons and equipment have been apprehended by smaller, but determined rebel groups. In September, president Poroshenko stated that around 65% of military vehicles have been lost.⁵⁹

Army suffered heavy losses, far exceeding official figures (International Crisis Group 2015).⁶⁰ Desertion,⁶¹ mental disorders, suicides, self-mutilation were widespread. Some captured soldiers changed sides and joined the rebels. Poor supplies and logistics, lack of training and coordination resulted in setbacks and a loss of life. Although in western regions patriotic feelings were rife and men wished to join the army, mobilization resource throughout the country was near exhaustion. In these conditions, Minsk-1 Protocol brokered on 5 September under the OSCE aegis was a relief for Kiev. Memorandum of 19 September specified Protocol's provisions, notably on force deployment, although the sides faulted on and off on their implementation.

Ceasefire prevented seizure of Mariupol which was within rebels' easy reach and calmed the situation down. However, shelling and firefights continued. Violations were driven by attempts to create a defensible separation line, with both sides seeking to improve their positions. Rebel objectives were to capture Donetsk airport to stop city shelling; Volnovakha, Debaltsevo where frontline dipped deep into their territory and Schastye with its power generation capacity. Donetsk airport, battle for which lasted for eight months, was finally taken in January 2015, but Ukrainian positions remain dangerously close. Rebels staged subversive acts to disrupt Ukrainian army's supplies and communication lines during ceasefire.

Inter-Minsk period witnessed transformation of guerrillas into an organized fighting force, thanks to Russian instruction and internal consolidation. Territorial units and task forces were introduced and former 'Somali pirates' acquired boots and night vision goggles. Improved performance and coordination were evident in full-scale combat operations in Debaltsevo in 2015 which spelt the end of the first ceasefire. After Ukrainian forces were surrounded and suffered a disastrous defeat, on 12 February Minsk-2 stipulated territorial gains as new status quo. The second ceasefire enabled reduction of shelling of Donetsk, but from 10 April bombardments and sporadic firefights affected Peski, Karlovka and Avdeevka settlements. Minsk-2 lasted for four months, – less than Minsk – 1, – when heavy fighting erupted in late May, with Moscow in the background halting insurgents' appetites. Rebel sources claim that they almost took Maryinka, but were told by the 'higher authorities' to let go.

The question is how much land rebels wish to take before they decide to stop fighting. Donbass movement although rooted in its local context, is not confined to narrow

geographic boundaries, because its ideology is not based on an ethnic historic homeland. In practice, some leaders believe that advances much beyond current positions would not be to their advantage. Populations further westwards may not welcome them as liberators, but treat them as enemies. They should stop at the point where a viable frontier can be established and rebel-held towns are out of Ukrainian artillery range. Mariupol is a big city and has an advantage of a seaport suitable for exports, but will need to be supplied and population looked after which can be a burden. Rebel forces will have to shell civilian areas which will turn people away from them.

Such figures are few. Most others think that the areas formerly under rebel control as of May 2014 should be re-taken, including Slavyansk, Kramatorsk, Mariupol, Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. Many fighters originate from there, cherish dreams of 'liberation' and returning home. Areas where the population voted 'yes' in May 2014 referenda are regarded as part of the same polity because the vote gives the rebels a claim to legitimacy: people there expressed their free will, and Kiev is holding them by force. Irrespective of the referenda quality, their results provide a foundation for the new republics' narrative. Moreover, these cities have industrial capabilities, useful for establishing an economic base for the breakaway republics. General Sergei Petrovsky (*Bad Soldier*), head of DNR military intelligence, notes that 30–40% of fighters think this way, while he and the others consider the administrative boundaries of Donetsk oblast a viable target.⁶² It appears that a dash beyond Donbass is not on anybody's cards.

How sincere are rebel negotiators in Minsk process when they say that they accept principle of territorial integrity of Ukraine is a question. Zakharchenko stated in Donetsk on 15 June 2015 that 'whatever happens in Minsk, DNR is a self-governing state and will never be a part of Ukraine; blood is between us.'⁶³

Managing survival

When protests turned militant, many administration heads ran away, leaving their mostly female deputies to govern in interim. Some stayed and, like Slavyansk mayor Nelly Shtepa, were pressurized to state their allegiance to 'people's republics,' while others were left in peace to perform their duties. Until July 2014, rebels coexisted relatively peacefully with old administrators. Governor Taruta worked in Donetsk until the end of May 2014. Mayor of Donetsk Lukyanchenko left the city for Kiev in July, after security situation deteriorated and as a result of speaking to Strelkov when he was forced to chose sides. In some places, 'people's mayors' were appointed to oversee actions of administrative personnel who did not dare to disobey people with guns.

Rebels eventually got a handle on running civilian affairs, as order and service delivery got maintained by war-time means. In Torez, rubbish collection got exemplary. In Gorlovka, in the words of commander Bezler, 'Mr. Klep remains a mayor with a stamp and a signature right. I protect and take care of him [he is under guard] – head shaven, dressed for the times, sings Soviet hymn in the morning, rise at 6 am and bed at 22.30. He is being morally cleansed and learns to live by the means, without taking bribes.'⁶⁴

Disorder unleashed crime, although before July 2014, isolated incidents on a large territory were too small scale to give rebels a banditry image. Crime wave accelerated when war intensified and the guerrillas were running out of money. At the same time, tough justice was enforced in a merciless fight against crime. In the worst case, hostage-taking, looting

and rape could be punished by death, even within one's own ranks. Public execution of perpetrators periodically took place especially since rebels could not afford to keep running prisons. Curfews were introduced, sale of alcohol restricted, drunkenness in combat areas was prohibited and for civilians got punishable by 'community service.' Fight against drugs has been effective, and most channels were ruthlessly blocked, with users left hung out to dry.⁶⁵

Despite grievances against Kiev, support for rebel cause was lukewarm, until political differences transformed into combat lines. Previously, the region was made up of roughly three constituencies: those with opposing pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian orientations, and those who would adapt to either Russia or Ukraine as long as security, jobs and welfare were available, and cultural rights were ensured. Many of this ambivalent group felt as culturally Russian, but a part of Ukrainian citizenry. People with strong Ukrainian identity, – many among middle class – largely left at the start of insurgency.⁶⁶

Further on, population's position shifted towards self-rule and away from Kiev. Remaining city residents that suffered artillery bombardments by Ukrainian army have resolutely turned against Kiev in 'Won't forget, won't forgive!' outcry as civilian casualties mounted. Support or at least acquiescence of rebel cause was shown by return of displaced people to the territories when the ceasefire was announced in September 2014.⁶⁷

Visitors report enthusiasm for 'young republics' and a strong pro-Russian orientation. Although unemployment is rampant, security in second half of 2015 has been improving, and that is what matters.⁶⁸ International observers in Donetsk stress that they never have seen the city so clean.⁶⁹ Areas outside of line of fire have been returned to civilian life, with public transport and infrastructure functioning. According to Donetsk mayor Igor Martynov, most of the displaced returned and city population reached 900.000. Great efforts are put into restoration of law and order. In autumn 2015, LNR local police started to return vehicles misappropriated during uprising chaos to their owners.⁷⁰ In the words of sociologist Kopat'ko,

I would not like to idealise anything, but today Donetsk is a very clean city. Communal services work exceptionally well. War has laid its imprint on life in Donetsk, but what immediately meets the eye is that how much people changed. Those who stayed. Because a war brings out the worst filth, but also creates incredible relations among people, new type of solidarity.⁷¹

Resumption of war is a preoccupation, with resultant pressure on de facto authorities to push Ukrainian Army away from shelling positions. October 2015 poll data say that around 80% of Donetsk city residents perceive a very high degree of probability that hostilities would resume. A feeling of anxiety is experienced by 57% of respondents in Donetsk; 63% stated that the most important thing for them is hope for better future.⁷²

After a year of fighting, economic decline is apparent. Many buildings are damaged, production cycles disrupted, some businesses withdrew and currency problems prevent a banking system to get on its feet. Medical staff, teachers, social care workers and prison staff have not been paid by Kiev since July 2014, although many continued with their duties. Exchange with mainland got restricted and freedom of movement limited by a permit system introduced on 21 January 2015 by Temporary Order (UN OHCHR 2015a). Conscious efforts by Kiev to cut the connectors, such as restrictions on movement and prohibition on deliveries – other than humanitarian, – forced territories away from Ukrainian social and economic space.

This divide is most painfully felt in government-controlled areas of Donbass where the conflict dealt a blow to identity of the residents who found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Ostracized by the rest of Ukraine as Yanukovich supporters and potentially disloyal citizens, Donbass Kiev-controlled population became downcasts who lost their working-class identity of an industrial region, but could not join new-style patriotism. They saw deterioration in their lives in security and economy as war progressed. It is believed that many rebel sympathizers exist in cities formerly under the rebel control. In an expert view, many people there 'still do not like Ukraine much and like Russia, are afraid of Right Sector and are alienated by 'national idea.'⁷³

Russia provides essential social payments. DNR Security Council Secretary Alexander Khodakovsky stated that 70% of republic's budget expenditure is covered by Moscow. Coordinator of 'non-humanitarian assistance' Alexander Juchkovsky estimated that from April to October 2015, Moscow spent 150 billion roubles on civilian aid alone.⁷⁴ Some enterprises, e.g. metal works in Alchevsk, continue to operate, export their produce via Ukraine, using its customs stamp and pay taxes to Kiev. Industrial connections with mainland are not wholly disrupted, and there are actors on both sides who are interested in their preservation.

Self-governing arrangements are put into practice and gradually get rooted. New systems started functioning, even if DNR and LNR legal infrastructures are not recognized: 'centralised civilian 'administrative structures' and 'procedures' continued to develop in the DNR and LNR. These include the 'legislature', 'judiciary system', 'ministries' and 'law enforcement' (UN OHCHR 2015c).

Kiev's fluctuating responses and prospects for resolution

The conflict could have been framed in power devolution terms which at its gestation may have helped to resolve it. However, federalization idea was rejected outright by Kiev and the West as it was coming from Russia with no discussion on substance, although it could have offered a way out of developing tensions. Poroshenko's election brought hopes as many in Ukraine welcomed him as an answer to split along the regional lines. New president personified the demand for unity and his declared priorities of peace and reforms found a popular resonance.

These expectations did not come true. Poroshenko missed opportunities for peace in 2014 on three critical junctions. Firstly, at the moment when he came to power and before support for rebel cause in Donbass got entrenched. Instead, he sent army and heavy weapons in. Ceasefire declared in June 2014 was too short and with unrealistic conditions attached. Secondly, in August when rebels were in retreat, lost major cities and asked for talks, Kiev declined, and troops were ordered to push in. In September Kiev, for the first time, negotiated in earnest after military defeat. However, Poroshenko failed to prepare society and build an elite consensus, let alone reign the military and volunteer battalions in. Faced with opponents from 'patriotic' camp, President preferred to avoid taking major risks. The desire to entrench his position in October parliamentary elections superseded president's peacemaking endeavour.

Poroshenko's approach was characterized by duality. Presidential group, despite its militant rhetoric, simultaneously acted towards peace. It realized that the war was ruining economy, army needs were draining resources and IDP burden was hard to sustain. Efforts were made to keep up connectors with rebel-held territories after Minsk-1 rather than

pursue a confrontational line to cut off Donbass from a lifeline. Government maintained transport links where possible. Pensions and benefits to residents of rebel-held territories were paid but they had to obtain them in government-controlled areas.

No policy on cutting rebels from national currency existed, but there was a problem of moving cash to territories. Trade in precarious conditions went on. This attitude started to change in October with Lustration Law adoption that purged advocates of the East from official positions and 2014 parliamentary elections, in which pro-war National Front and its allies showed strong performance. This created political momentum for a confrontational approach which characterized next period. Kiev suspended budget allocations to territories, while obtaining social payments in government-held areas became virtually impossible by travel permit system, as Ukrainian authorities stepped up measures to halt 'pension tourism.'

By summer 2015, the only legal way into territories from Ukrainian side was through Artyomovsk – Gorlovka corridor, as the last checkpoint in Lugansk oblast was blocked by rebels in June. *Hryvna*, in short supply by then, was getting out of circulation, replaced by Russian rouble. Foodstuffs from Russia started to prevail over Ukrainian produce.⁷⁵ Rather than forcing surrender, effect was a boost to grey economy networks thriving on petty smuggling.⁷⁶

In these 'no war, no peace' conditions, official ceasefires held, but were poorly observed. Sides negotiate on Ukraine's territorial integrity basis, which rebel leaders acknowledged in the Minsk process. The main pillars were a return of control over the Russian – Ukrainian border to Kiev, distribution of powers between the centre and the 'special status regions,' permission to keep their own police force in exchange for the centre's right to appoint judges and prosecutors, legitimization of rebel leadership, whereas Kiev insists on local elections according to Ukrainian law. Constitutional guarantees of country's non-accession to rival blocs, such as NATO, constitute one of rebels' demands.⁷⁷

As political impasse was too great, Minsk sought to reduce it to several pieces, each of them appeared manageable. Were these measures resolutely put into practice as designed in September 2014 when situation was fluid, they had a fighting chance to alter the course of conflict towards quick resolution, but make less sense as it became entrenched.

The matter is that Minsk framework is so far apart from parties' real aspirations that it is hard to see it as a basis for any settlement. Kiev wishes a unitary state, looking away from Russia. Rebels seek the opposite at the least. War trauma is huge. People in Donbass can hardly imagine how they are going to live together in Ukraine with those who have been warring against them. Over 50% of DNR respondents in October 2015 poll asked about how they see Donbass future, answered 'independent republic.' To the question on whether Donbass can become a part of Ukraine, 14% said 'yes' and 68% said 'no'.⁷⁸

Thus, Minsk process is regarded as primarily in the interests of Putin, Merkel and Hollande as allowing them to preserve a diplomatic façade and progress along a roadmap. The process which started as crisis rapid response was instrumental in scaling down the fighting and reducing the number of casualties, but now has settled for a long haul. On 6 November 2015, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov noted that full implementation of Minsk agreement, scheduled for the end of 2015, would extend into 2016.

As diplomacy takes its course, Minsk agreement inspires conflictual attitudes inside Ukraine: while some view it as a greater compromise vis-à-vis rebels than the country can accept, others do not wish re-integration with the people they feel nothing in common with. 'Minsk Agreement is an additional factor of conflict for the country. Its implementation

would not change basic premise of the war between Russia and Ukraine.⁷⁹ Thus, there are no internal grounds set in motion to enable society to accept a solution which will convey legitimacy to the other party.

Moreover, government came to believe that its military capabilities have improved and a battlefield victory is feasible. Initial assumptions on the state of rebel forces as a bunch of criminals, alcoholics and adventurists cost Ukrainian side dearly, and it got to appreciate the enemy. After a year of fighting, the army, starting from a low base, has hardened. Expectation of lethal weapons and Western military training gives the army a fighting chance. Noteworthy, Ukraine is a major arms producer in its own right (Rumer 2014). State arms trader *Ukrspetzexport* advertises a range of defence products and in 2014 participated in arms fairs such as Farnborough, when armed hostilities in Donbass were at their height.⁸⁰

There is a view that while 2nd Maidan split the society along identity lines, the war has united it, as people who were ambivalent towards Ukrainian state, came out strongly in support of it, including ethnic Russians.⁸¹ At the same time, war enthusiasm has never been strong in Ukrainian society. Support for peace increased from September 2014 to June 2015 and majority wanted it, but decisive support for war also doubled. In June 2015, 61.8% thought that it is necessary to stop the war in Donbass even if Ukraine has to accept loss of territories. 30% believed in the need for fighting until victory.⁸²

In personal observation, many believe that Donbass is not worth painful sacrifices for: its people are different and war-torn territory is not of a particular value; it is better to cut losses and move on. Drawing a parallel with Russia, Moscow reconquered Chechnya at a price of two wars, only to arrive at a popular desire to exclude it from Russia ten years later (Matveeva 2013). Dissent affects security sector. Apart from captured soldiers who change sides, in 2015 high-profile defectors to rebel side included officers of Ukrainian Armed Forces of Donbass origin, such as major general Alexander Kolomiets, aide to the Defence Minister and former Donetsk military commissar, Miroshnichenko brothers (an intelligence officer and a diplomat) and Oleg Chernousov, head of Lugansk customs.⁸³

Eventually, although there are those who are prepared to fight 'until the last Russian on our territory', a discourse emerged in society as of whether Ukraine needs these territories. Since the Soviet times, Donbass had a strong negative image in the rest of Ukraine as a lumpen mass full of people of low intellectual calibre. Arguments are that many among professional middle class have left, those who stayed are low-educated, unskilled element with values alien to that of modern Ukraine, and their society is incompatible with the country's European choice.⁸⁴ Donbass has high numbers of retired people which constitutes pressure on social security, while devastated territories would require a revival package which the country cannot afford.⁸⁵

Interviewed experts in Kiev in 2015 underscored that the point of no return has been reached: 'I am no longer interested in their return. Ukraine does not need Donbass economically: industry has died and agriculture is hard-going there because of no tradition for it. Most importantly, lot's of blood has been spilt, and it would be impossible to breach it.'⁸⁶ A sober view perhaps was that 'in fact, nobody knows what to do with Donbass now.'⁸⁷

Such moods do not transpire into an active peace support, as they seldom find political articulation. Society at large does not pay a heavy price for the conflict which could pressurize leadership into difficult compromise. Population so far demonstrated considerable resilience. Men can be mobilized to the battlefield, but in big cities it is possible to avoid being drafted. Although casualties are mounting, their true scale is withheld and, dispersed

around the country of about 40 million, they are not immediately felt. Deterioration of living conditions can be attributed to an economic downturn due to restructuring policies of new government. In October 2015, the World Bank projected real GDP to decline by 12% in 2015 (The World Bank Group 2015).

Moscow has fewer interlocutors in Kiev government than at the beginning of Poroshenko's term. As the president moved closer to the US, his value as a negotiation partner for Moscow diminished and contacts scaled down. Kiev government is not trying very hard. Its implicit strategy is to outsource conflict resolution to the West which should pressurize Russia into ordering rebels into a line. Moscow is unable to do so however much it would wish. Although conflict is a liability for Moscow, its ability to open a tap on its resolution should not be exaggerated.

Some civil society experts argue that 'the war is not over, and Russia will be weakened; therefore, it is not in Ukraine's interests to give up too much ground in Minsk now. Time is working in Ukraine's favour.'⁸⁸ A strategy of waiting when tables reverse and Ukraine strengthens vis-à-vis Russia is precarious. On the contrary, time is working against re-integration of Donbass territories into Ukraine, as the sides' positions harden. There are fewer forces among Kiev political elite who are prepared to work towards peace than when Poroshenko was elected. Rada has less representation from the East and existing MPs are hardly influential. Surviving oligarchs of Yanukovich era struggle for self-preservation, and former managerial elite lost its credentials.

Encouraged by the West, Kiev refused to engage with rebel leaders directly as negotiation partners.⁸⁹ Rare calls by political analysts to hold direct talks with DNR and LNR go into void. As Andrei Yermolayev argues, 'refusal to negotiate with representatives of DNR and LNR only accelerates statebuilding processes in these republics. A de facto border between us has been already formed, and new processes of consolidation in DNR and LNR are in effect state formation processes.'⁹⁰

Discouragement of direct talks at the time when they could have been a game change was a missed opportunity by the West. As Sakwa (2015, 181) argues,

Fundamental inability of Kiev and its Western allies to understand that this was ... a genuine revolt against a particular type of statehood ... meant that they could not recognise the political subjectivity of the rebellion as a force with which there should be dialogue.

Too late to turn back?

Presently, rebels are not where they started in spring 2014. A distinct movement crystallized out of amorphous aspirations and dreams, acquired political identity and popular support. Society shredded its Ukrainian element due to exodus of many of its bearers and shifted away from Kiev.

Situation on the ground is such that both Ukrainian military and rebels are not satisfied by the war outcomes and believe that they can win a victory. As long as shelling of major cities by Ukrainian army is possible, incentives for war will prevail. If momentum to supply weapons to Ukraine builds up, so would urgency in rebel camp to acquire more territory before this happens. Taking back the territories which rebels controlled and on which May referenda legitimized their cause inspires fighters. Only then, their desire for territorial gains would be saturated and the will for a lasting ceasefire would be genuine rather than forced inducing them to freeze the conflict and concentrate on rebuilding civilian life.

Mutually hurting stalemate has not been reached, and with it – a real quest for peace. Even if we assume that Russia and the West act in good faith in pressurising their local allies into a peace deal, the deal would not last until internal conditions are ripe. Instead, a sense of a deadlock has emerged. Federalization is rejected by both sides. It falls way short of rebels' aspirations who fight for an outright independence and maximum they could accept is an Aceh-style confederation, i.e. Kiev's rule in the name only. Moscow also has fewer incentives for peace to press rebels much further beyond what it has already done. It no longer relates lifting Western sanctions to Minsk Agreement implementation.

Kiev views federalization with apprehension because of implications for centre–periphery relations and fears that other regions would demand the same rights. Freezing conflict and installing genuine ceasefire along mutually agreed partition could be in Kiev's pragmatic interests as it would allow it to move on with its European integration plans. However, dynamic in Kiev is exactly the opposite. Political momentum is not in favour of cutting losses. President Poroshenko consolidated his power, asserted central authority over regions and made security forces his allies. Sense of power vacuum when all scenarios were possible, including breaking away of more regions, no longer applies. This makes Kiev less flexible as it feels empowered to talk to Donbass from a position of strength. Patriotic moods and significance of conflict for new nationhood work against a solution which would amount to an acceptance of defeat, even if a temporary one, and a loss of face.

In case President's standing weakens under strain of a very slow pace of change, economic and social hardship and vocal parliament talking grievances up, an offensive in Donbass could be a way out of internal problems. Risk is that renewed war may strengthen the regime, but inflict further territorial losses.

Conflict renders some important conclusions. Firstly, a leaderless uprising is possible: people will come out when the moment is right. Secondly, insurgents and their leaderships became a reality and will not wither away. They are likely to grow stronger politically and militarily. Risk of rebellion's implosion, real in 2014, by now is gone. Thirdly, policy line taken by Kiev not to acknowledge 'people's republics' political personalities is counterproductive and sooner or later will have to be reversed, if not by this government, then by its successor, if negotiations have any chance. Lastly, Donbass movement lays a larger claim than ethno-nationalisms of 1990s which were concerned with their particular historical grievances, and its appeal inspires a wider solidarity. Emergence of an identity in Europe that challenges Western hegemony on a non-religious basis can have far-reaching consequences.

Where all this will lead Ukraine is uncertain. If current trends continue unabated, – which is likely, – Donbass political trajectory will irreversibly move away from the rest of Ukraine. And another frozen conflict is already added to the post-Soviet space, this time encompassing a large territory and three million people living on it. An honest break would be in the interests of both sides before more offensives happen and lives are lost, but taking such step by the Kiev leadership requires more courage than there is will for it.

Notes

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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