



# *SSEES-ing Russia's undeclared 2014 invasion of Ukraine's Donbas*

## Expert briefing

18 November 2023

### BACKGROUND

On 15 November 2023 the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (UCL SSEES) hosted the launch of Dr Jakob Hauter's [new book reassessing the outbreak of war in Ukraine's Donbas in 2014](#) as part of its [SSEES-ing NOW](#) events series.

[Dr Jade McGlynn](#) and [Jaroslava Barbieri](#) discussed the book's findings and their implications for our understanding of the current state of Russia's invasion. The panel was chaired by [Professor Andrew Wilson](#) of UCL-SSEES.

#### Dr Jakob Hauter

**KEY POINT** The war that started in eastern Ukraine in 2014 was already a Russian invasion, not a Ukrainian civil war.

1. Russia was the main driver of the key events that led to the outbreak of militarized violence. A local separatist rebellion would have been doomed to fail if Russia had not taken the lead.
2. In its first stages, Russia's 2014 invasion did not require the involvement of regular armed forces. Instead, Russia initially relied on irregular fighters. These fighters claimed to act on their own initiative. However, they

were entangled with the Russian state to such an extent, they can justifiably be defined as state agents.

3. There was a certain degree of local support for separatism in the Donbas in 2014. However, local support was less important in the hierarchy of causes than the fact that armed men from Russia entered Ukraine to lead the fighting.
4. The events of 2014 show that diplomatic efforts to freeze the conflict and appease Russia while leaving Ukraine vulnerable were a catastrophic failure that must not be repeated. Now Russia has escalated its war into a full-scale invasion in 2022, it is key that it never gets a third chance to finish what it started in 2014. Ukraine must either receive robust Western security guarantees or be armed to an extent that guarantees long-term deterrence.

#### Dr Jade McGlynn (KCL)

**KEY POINT** The book's findings pose key questions for policy-makers and researchers seeking to understand the subsequent decisions-making of Russian leaders.

1. The book offers nuanced, methodically rigorous analysis and clear conclusions

of the implications of the 2014 events for current policy making.

2. The book's key finding is that Ukraine would have been able to fight off the Russian-led separatists if Russia had not sent its regular armed forces to the Donbas in late August 2014.
3. This finding points up key questions that researchers and policy makers must consider when assessing the decisions of the Russian leadership: why did Russia allow the defeat of separatism in Mariupol in June 2014 but then send its regular army to stop the defeat of separatism across the Donbas in August? Why did it stop short of trying to conquer the whole of the Donbas or formally annex occupied territory in 2014, but not in 2022?

1. The book provides an important counterargument to the superficial analysis of many works that classify the 2014 events as a Ukrainian civil war.
2. Russia has made long-term efforts to stoke pro-Russian sentiment in the Donbas prior to 2014.
3. Russia's long-term objective of undermining Ukrainian independence has been clear and consistent. However, the Russian leadership's decision-making was often ad-hoc and did not necessarily follow a carefully devised masterplan. This ad-hoc approach continued in Russia's policy toward the occupied parts of the Donbas after 2014.
4. Especially since 2017, Russia has considerably stepped up efforts to assimilate the self-declared people's republics making their reintegration into Ukrainian society into a major challenge.

*A full recording of the event can be found [here](#).*

### Jaroslava Barbieri (University of Birmingham)

**KEY POINT** Russian policy has combined consistent long-term objectives to undermine Ukrainian independence with ad hoc decision-making.

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#### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

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