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The Donbas in 2014: Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War

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Abstract

This essay argues that historical and identity factors, economic fears and alienation from the new government in Kyiv were only part of the reason for the rise of the separatist movement in the Donbas, Ukraine, in the spring of 2014. They set a baseline, but one not high enough to account for the creation of two mini-'Republics' and a prolonged war, without considering the effect of Russian sponsorship and the role of local elites, mainly from the literal and metaphorical 'Family' of former President Viktor Yanukovych.

THE WAR IN EAST UKRAINE THAT BEGAN IN THE SPRING OF 2014 has produced many contrasting analyses. Some commentators have chosen to read the origins of the separatist movement in the Donbas region not just as mainly domestic, but as a 'grassroots' phenomenon with genuine 'popular support' (Sakwa 2015, p. 149). Others have largely blamed Russia for provoking the conflict from the outside. This essay argues that there was sufficient alienation from Kyiv to provide a baseline for a local civil conflict, and that alienation fed off a long-standing tradition of social distance in Donbas identity, but that all the key triggers that produced all-out war were provided by Russia and by local elites in the Donbas. Baseline factors were precisely that. They set a higher level of support for a pro-Russian movement in the Donbas than in other parts of eastern and southern Ukraine, but not at a level high enough to lead to armed rebellion and sustain a drawn-out war. Moreover, the baseline factors have themselves been subject to manipulation from above, by both Ukrainian and Russian elites. That said, civil conflicts and, ultimately, 'civil wars are highly "endogenous" processes', so the war itself has now had deep and long-lasting effects of its own, changing both 'preexisting popular allegiances' and narratives (Kalyvas 2006, pp. 3, 389); but that is not why the conflict escalated in the first place.

Existing explanations

One interpretation of the outbreak of the conflict is that the Donbas was the most serious of many fault-lines in internal Ukrainian identity politics. According to Nicolai Petro, 'the peremptory removal of President Yanukovych violated the delicate balance of interests forged between

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Galicia and Donbas. It was thus seen as a direct threat to the core interest of Russophone Ukrainians' (Petro 2015, p. 31). Allied to the grievances of the high concentration of local Russophones, the unique 'regional identity' of the Donbas and its 'inherent contradictions, which worked in an unexpected ruinous way' (Klinova 2014), then provided the spark for the separatist movement.

Others have looked not to pre-existing popular allegiances, but to material interests which led locals to want to preserve economic ties with Russia, which they saw as threatened by the new government in Kyiv after the Maidan protests of 2013–2014, and a growing sense of alienation from 'orange' and west Ukrainian politics since the first abortive 'Orange Revolution' of 2004 (Giuliano 2015). Zhukov (2016) also argues for the predominance of economic over identity factors, and argues that of the three main types of local economic activity, metallurgy, coal mining and machine-building, anti-Kyiv resistance was strongest in areas dominated by machine-building, which was most at risk from any disruption of trade with Russia—and from Russian sanctions.

Others have broadened the list to political factors, but kept them mainly internal. According to Serhii Kudelia, 'popular emotions specific to the region—*resentment and fear*' combined with 'political factors—*state fragmentation, violent regime change, and the government's low coercive capacity*' to 'launch the armed secessionist movement' (Kudelia 2014, emphasis in original). Arel and Driscoll argue that 'regime collapse' in Kyiv (that is, the rapid desertion of members of parliament from the ruling Party of Regions (*Partiia rehioniv*) after the killings in Kyiv on 21 February 2014, apart from diehards from the party's strongholds of Crimea and the Donbas) as well as initial 'state incapacitation' in the Donbas were the main factors in the local genesis of the conflict. They also suggest that this allowed for the penetration of Russian special forces, which they date to between four and six weeks later, and ultimately to conventional war.[1]

This essay argues that identity factors are an insufficient explanation. 'Preexisting popular allegiances' were not that different in the Donbas (see the two sections on identity below). Local political factors were hugely important, but 'state incapacitation', and even more so state collapse, is an exaggeration. Parts of the state did not operate. The new authorities in Kyiv were incompetent or distracted. But the story also involves the defection of key parts of the state and the penetration of others. And, as resource mobilisation theory would predict (Smith & Wilson 1997), more was needed in terms of resources and elite leadership for the separatist movement to develop. And also to point it in the direction it took—the initial mood in the Donbas was febrile and even contradictory, and compatible with several possible outcomes.

Other commentators see outside factors as key (Mitrokhin 2015a, 2015b): namely Russia, which played the key role in stitching together a coalition of local forces. Local actors would not have acted as they did without Russian support. Arel and Driscoll have cited the work of Regan (2000) that two thirds of seemingly intrastate civil wars in fact involve 'intervention' (more serious than mere influence) by third party foreign powers—and are still civil wars.[2] But there is a world of difference between joining in a civil conflict or civil war and either starting it or enabling its escalation. On its own, the Donbas rebellion was actually a triple

[1]See 'The Civil War in Ukraine', draft paper in preparation, presentation available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfQ9IgTNu-M, accessed 18 February 2016.

[2]See 'The Civil War in Ukraine', draft paper in preparation, presentation available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfQ9IgTNu-M, accessed 18 February 2016.

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failure. Without sufficient Russian support, the first attempt at revolt was smouldering away in March and early April 2014, with several nasty 'flare-ups', but was deemed insufficiently incendiary to warrant the attempt by Igor Girkin's special forces to fan the flames from the middle of April. The attempts at revolt in Kharkiv and Odesa at the same time were less successful, and there was no broad rebellion in 'Novorossiia', a variable Russian term, but most often meaning the whole of eastern and southern Ukraine. And finally, the rebels were being pushed back by Ukrainian forces in the summer and were saved from further reverse by the massive Russian escalation in August 2014.

The remainder of this essay looks in turn at history and at identity, both before and after Ukrainian independence in 1991, as baseline factors but ambiguous resources for the Donbas separatist movement, and then looks at how both local elites and Russia combined to create a separatist movement from weak and patchy 'grassroots' material.

Baseline factors—history

Donbas history is a limited resource. It is almost all new, largely confined to a story of industrial development in the late Tsarist and Soviet eras. To the Russian side, this makes the concentration on the Soviet era only natural; to the Ukrainian side local 'historiography' therefore looks skin-deep. Attempts to go back further have little resonance for such a young society, especially on the Russophile side. And this history has led to ambiguous and shifting identities among the local population.

But all rebel movements need a story to tell. Russian nationalists in the Crimea have a resonant, if controversial story. Putin (2014) has escalated talk of the baptism of Volodymyr/ Vladimir, Prince of Kyiv/Kiev on the peninsula in 988, into comparing Crimea to the Temple Mount, even though Volodymyr went back to Kyiv after his baptism. The Golden Age of Russian Crimea can also be celebrated, although in truth it only stretched from the Crimean War in 1853–1856 until 1917, which is much shorter than the Crimean Tatar era, from the thirteenth century until 1783.

In the Donbas, in contrast, rebel leaders have jumped from one potential historical story to another. The region was never part of Volodymyr's kingdom of Rus', but was periodically under Crimean Tatar rule. The Russian view of medieval history rejects the Ukrainian idea that it was then mainly colonised from the west, by Zaporozhian Cossacks, that is, Ukrainians or proto-Ukrainians,[3] for the idea of colonisation from the north and the east, predominantly by Russians or proto-Russians. Large numbers of northern settlers supposedly crossed the river Siverskii Donets heading south from around 1600. But this does not create a Russian ethnic history of the region; traditionally this historiography fed the pluralist idea of a Russian-led, but still multi-ethnic population that used Russian as a *lingua franca* (Wilson 1995).

The Don Cossacks, meanwhile, pushed in from the east. But despite the use of Cossack symbols during the post-2014 war and the presence of a strong 'Don Cossack' militia, the idea of the Donbas as a Cossack heartland is problematical. The self-proclaimed Don Cossack 'Ataman' Nikolai Kozitsyn has declared that no one 'invited' Ukrainians to their territory.[4]

[3] 'Donetskaia i Luganskaia oblasti—eto istoricheskie zemli donskikh kazakov, a ne Ukrainy?', *Likbez*, 2015, available at: http://likbez.org.ua/donetsk-and-luhansk-region-a-historic-land-of-the-don-cossacks-not-ukraine.html, accessed 18 February 2016.

[4] 'ART Interview with Nikolai Kozitsyn', *YouTube*, 8 February 2015, available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=2A_XmeOfdog, accessed 16 February 2016.

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But the historical territory of the Don Cossack ends at the river Kal'mius in the west and the Siverskii Donets in the north. This is precisely why the territory east of the Kal'mius was not part of the Novorossisk guberniya of 1764–1783 and 1796–1802. There was a separate 'Land of the Don Host' (*Oblast' Voyska Donskogo*) after 1786, renamed a guberniya in 1870. It is no coincidence that the Don Cossack fighters are now on this territory, which in modern terms is southern Luhans'k, and declare it to be Cossack territory, rather than the Donbas as a whole (Bredikin 2015). So-called Don Cossack historiography is actually mainly narrowly bound up with the struggle between the Ataman and the leadership of the LNR (the self-proclaimed 'Luhans'k People's Republic') over who controls the 'Don Host' militia.[5] Nevertheless, both sides have drawn on the mythology of the Cossack era, and of 'their' nationalised Ukrainian or Russian Cossacks, as well as their successors from the Civil War era in 1918–1921, the *otamany*, to try and bolster their legitimacy (Gilley 2015).

Ironically or not, as of spring 2015 the line from the river Kal'mius to the Siverskii Donets' was basically the border of the rebel republics (the LDR plus the 'Donets'k People's Republic' or, from the Russian, DNR), with the addition of small territories in the north and at the western edge around Donets'k. But it would be hard to argue that this was because military fortunes reflected deep-lying historical factors. The ebb and flow of the front line—initial rebel land seizure to the north-west around Slov"ians'k in 2014, followed by large Ukrainian gains, only reversed by conventional Russian invasion in August 2014—was much more dependent on the situation on the battlefield and the level of Russian commitment of money and arms (see below). The historical 'border' also partially matches a concentration of industry to its east, though far from exactly, and again this is not historically determined. Yuri Zhukov's research (2016) has located many strongholds of rebel resistance in areas dominated by certain industries, especially machine-building, but military matters decided the area of rebel occupation. Ukrainian reluctance to advance into urban areas was also part of the military calculation.

It should also be pointed out that administrative 'borders', this time the one between the Russian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics, were also adjusted several times in the 1920s (Yefimenko 2014).[6] Large amounts of the Don territory were first awarded to Ukraine on ethnographic grounds in April 1920 and then split in October 1925, with more easterly territories going to Russia. The area around Stanytsia Luhans'ka, at the time of writing in early 2016 still in Kyiv's hands, was shifted to Ukraine in August 1920.

The alternative and broader idea of Novorossia is also vague and open to multiple interpretations, as well as referring only to brief and discontinuous periods between Russian imperial absorption of the northern Black Sea littoral after 1774 through to 1917. The Ukrainian side has successfully deconstructed the myth of a united 'Novorossiya' (Brekhunenko 2014; Gava 2014) while limited support for rebellion beyond the Donbas made the Kremlin go cold on the idea, at least temporarily. By 2015, the official web page of the DNR on 'occupied territories' referred not to Kharkiv or Odesa but only to those parts of Donets'k and Luhans'k under Ukrainian army control.[7] The leaders of the DNR have increasingly fallen back on

[5]'Kazachyi soyuz "Oblast Voiska Donskogo"', *Ksovd.org*, 2015, available at: http://ksovd.org/, accessed 21 March 2016.

[6]'Dons'ke pytannia u derzhavnii polytytsi ukraïns'koho Hetmanata i Dyrektoriï', *Haidamaka* website, available at: http://haidamaka.org.ua/page_donpythetdyrdon.html, accessed 4 June 2015.

[7]See, Dnrespublika.info, available at: http://dnrespublika.info/category/novosti/novorussia-new/novosti-dnr/okkupirovannaya-territoriya/, accessed 8 August 2015.

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references to the 'Donets'k nation' (*Donetskii narod*), most notably in a series of posters in 2015 under the slogan 'the Donets'k nation decides'.[8]

In 2015 the rebel leaders were also toying with the idea of the Donets'k–Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic (DKR) of 1918 (the Russian spellings are Donets'k and Krivoi Rog) as a historical precedent for their project, starting with a rally in Donets'k on 12 February 2015 on the 97th anniversary of its proclamation in 1918 (Barabanov 2015).[9] On 6 February 2015 the DNR issued a Memorandum 'On the basis of state-building, political and historical continuity', proclaiming 'the continuation of traditions of the Donets'k–Krivoi Rog Republic and declar[ing] that the state of the Donets'k People's Republic is its successor'.[10] The DNR has also tried to revive the myth of the local Bolshevik leader 'Artem' (Fyodor Sergeyev, 1883–1921), hero of the local revolution and the founder of the DKR. Kyiv, on the other hand, took down his monuments in two Donbas cities that it re-occupied in the summer of 2014, Slov''ians'k and Artemivs'k, and a plaque to him in the capital Kyiv was vandalised, with other streets and places due to be renamed.[11]

The DKR can serve as a partial substitute for Novorossiya, as its imagined borders supposedly included what are now Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovs'k, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson—potentially the borders of an expanded DNR and LNR, the putative borders of which are not yet defined, other than by claiming the (post-1920s) *oblasti* of Donets'k and Luhans'k. Although rebel leader Andrei Purgin has made ritual denials of further territorial claims, stating that the 'DKR is an industrial region [whose] regions were united on economic principle … we are talking about the Russian world'.[12]

But the DKR is still a problematic symbol, despite the best efforts of a tiny number of local propagandists, led by one local historian Vladimir Kornilov (2011).[13] It was not founded because of the threat of the Ukrainian National Government, which had just left Kiev. It was a ploy in Lenin's shifting calculations as Ukrainian, German and Bolshevik forces fought over Ukraine. The hope of a united Bolshevik Ukraine made the DKR irrelevant, and the arrival of German occupying forces made it redundant. Lenin then ordered the Republic to be suppressed on 20 March 1918 (Stefanko 2014). The DKR was then depicted negatively in Soviet historiography (Studenna-Skruvka 2014, p. 187). The DNR flies the black–blue–red

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[8]'"Donetskii narod reshaet?" Bilbordy grupirovki "DNR" (fotogalereia)', *Kiev Pravda*, 29 June 2015, available at: www.kievpravda.com/news/7241, accessed 16 February 2016.

[9]'V Donetske proshel miting v chest' rozhdeniia Donetsko-Krivorozhskoi Respubliki', 12 February 2015, available at: http://novorossia.ws/video/62013-v-donecke-proshel-miting-posvyashennij-sozdaniyu-dkr.html, accessed 31 March 2016.

[10]'DNR ob'iavliaetsia preemnitsei Donetsko-Kryvorozhkoi Respubliki', *Zavtra.ru*, 5 February 2015, available at: http://zavtra.ru/content/view/dnr-obyavlyaetsya-preemnitsej-donetsko-krivorozhskoj-respubliki/, accessed 21 March 2016.

[11]'V Artemis'vku znesly pam''iatnik Artemu', *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, 10 July 2015, available at: http://dt.ua/UKRAINE/v-artemivsku-znesli-pam-yatnik-artemu-178461_.html, accessed 16 February 2016.

[12]'DNR ne pretenduet na territorii Donetsko-Krivorozhskoi respubliki—Purgin', *DAN news*, 6 February 2015, available at: http://dan-news.info/politics/dnr-ne-pretenduet-na-territorii-donecko-krivorozhskoj-respubliki-purgin.html, accessed 16 February 2016.

[13]'Pisatel' Vladimir Kornilov: Donbass idet k ideiam sovobody uzhe pochti stoletie', *LUG* (Lugansk Information Centre), 6 February 2015, available at: http://lug-info.com/comments/one/pisatel-vladimir-kornilov-donbass-idet-k-ideyam-svobody-uzhe-pochti-stoletie-251, accessed 16 February 2016.

tricolour flag that the previous 'Republic' supposedly used in the few weeks of its existence in 1918, but the evidence for its use is unclear (Edwards 2014). The DKR was a leftwing project, but most modern versions of the flag add a double-headed Russian imperial eagle.

The myth of the DKR therefore had little place in local consciousness. It may now have a better 'fit' for a Donbas mini-Republic or two, but it will largely have to be created *ex nihilo*. The rebel Republics are really reliant on an amalgam of Soviet historiography and its myths about the Donbas (see next section), with pan-Russian nationalism. For most locals World War II and their own experience in the practical habitus of Soviet industrialisation provide a more 'usable' past (Lipskii 2014). This history is even more recent than it seems, as the *Holodomor* (the death of millions in the famine that followed collectivisation in 1932–1933) in the region reset the clock, transforming the ethnic balance by depopulating huge areas of rural east Ukraine, as people were forced to flee to the towns to survive, where they were more subject to subsequent Russification, and by a general influx of Russian-speakers to replace the millions who were lost (Kramarenko 2006).[14] In the villages, more died because this was the steppe, simply because there was some minimal sustenance in the forest zones further north (Kuromiya 1998, pp. 167–68). The region's pre-Soviet Cossack-agricultural history died with the *Holodomor*.

Although the 'Stakhanovite' movement associated with the Donbas began in the 1930s and many historians have dated the emergence of the modern Donbas identity to the interwar period (Kuromiya 2015), 'in the Donbas people's memories don't really go past the Great Patriotic War'. Moreover, the consolidation of post-war Donbas society really dates from the Khrushchev years, after further post-war turbulence in Stalin's last years of rule. The key commemoration dates designed to cement the 'small homeland' local version of Soviet identity—the 'Day of liberation of the Donbas from German-fascist invaders' on 8 September, and the all-Soviet Victory Day on 9 May—only really date from 1965. The massive monument to the Donbas Liberators in Donets'k was only finally opened in 1984.

Baseline factors—identity

Soviet identity

Part of the reason for the separatist movement and war in the Donbas therefore lies with local identity politics, but only a part. The identity created in the Soviet Donbas is a persistent and hardy residual, which provides a baseline identity marker differentiating the region from the rest of Ukraine. But the line is not as sharp as between Crimea and the rest of Ukraine, and the sharpness of that differentiation has been variable. Nevertheless, such an identity does exist. As argued by Kostiantyn Skorkin, 'ignoring these processes will lead to the creation of a myth like the Ukrainophobe cliché about the "Habsburg General Staff", which in its time allegedly "invented" Ukraine' (Skorkin 2014, p. 27).

Soviet identity put down deep roots in the Donbas because nothing much came before it. The Soviet legacy is so determinant that separatist leaders have even claimed that 'Kiev's rejection of the legacy of the USSR [a reference to the de-Communisation laws passed by

[14]'Donbas Has Always Been Ukraine: The Holodomor and Russification Legacies', *Voices of Ukraine*, 5 June 2014, available at: http://maidantranslations.com/2014/06/05/donbas-has-always-been-ukraine-the-holodomor-and-russification-legacies/, accessed 16 February 2016.

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Kyiv in April 2015] deprives it of any right to the territory of the Donbas'.[15] The 'parliament' of the DNR also claims that pre-Soviet history is irrelevant to the region, as it was never part of any previous 'Ukrainian' states (though this was only partially true of the easternmost Don territories): 'the DKR was never a part of the UNR [Ukrainian National Republic of 1917–1918], nor Skoropadsky's Hetmanate [1918], nor the revived "state" declared by supporters of Bandera in L'viv in June 1941'.[16]

Ironically, attachment to the Soviet legacy was also because of resistance to ethnic nationalism, which has never had much of a history or appeal in the Donbas (Osipian & Osipian 2006), and its myth of a labour culture in which ethnic origins are dissolved. There are also hardly any real 'indigenous' locals; almost everyone is new—there is no real local myth of the 'land of our fathers'. Ukrainian and Russian masses interacted without much of a local cultural intelligentsia. State authorities were only minimally present until the very late Tsarist era, which facilitated the persistence of a strong local anarchist tradition (ironically in part the reverse of the Ukrainian Cossack myth), tempered by readiness to submit to power from above if sufficiently strong—but little tradition of public politics or civic activism in between.

Hiroaki Kuromiya (2015) has argued that this also made the Donbas open to a surprising variety of ideologies, albeit instrumentally. Political parties, even the Bolsheviks, were weak; civil society was even weaker, including organised religion. An intense informal culture of 'looking after one's own' and of 'winner takes all' took the place of any politics of 'give-and-take'. The Donbas also never had a classic proletariat: settlements grew up piecemeal and were often semi-rural, the technical intelligentsia was not strong enough to provide an elite and the humanist intelligentsia was tiny (Kuromiya 1998, p. 116). The population was often transient; the Donbas had a reputation as a haven for criminals who organised gangs with exotic names like the Malakhovs and Sibriakovs (Kuromiya 1998, p. 32). As many as a fifth of the local population had experience of Soviet prisons, but the local culture forgave all past lives, as factory directors were always short of labour (Klinova 2014).

The Soviet authorities wanted to build the Donbas as a 'little homeland' within the USSR, with considerable success, but the Donbas remained a law onto itself. Much of the rest of urban southern and eastern Ukraine was a melting-pot, but where relatively strong identities were often combined, resulting in hybridity as the characteristic cultural mode. But the Donbas was characterised by a triple distance (separation would be too strong a word): horizontal distance from the Soviet authorities in Moscow and then from the new Ukrainian authorities in Kyiv after 1991; vertical distance from rulers, both local and national, due to both paternalism and the privatisation of life; and an ideological or axiological distance from other people's narratives, including the more ideological parts of Soviet socialism, if not the eulogisation of labour culture, as well as Ukrainian nationalism.

[15]'Otkaz Kieva ot naslediia SSSR lishaet ego prava na territoriu Donbassa, schitaiut v Narodnom Sovete', *DAN news*, 21 May 2015, available at: http://dan-news.info/politics/otkaz-kieva-ot-naslediya-sssr-lishaet-ego-prava-na-territoriyu-donbassa-schitayut-v-narodnom-sovete.html, accessed 16 February 2016.

[16]'Otkaz Kieva ot naslediia SSSR lishaet ego prava na territoriu Donbassa, schitaiut v Narodnom Sovete', *DAN news*, 21 May 2015, available at: http://dan-news.info/politics/otkaz-kieva-ot-nasledya-sssr-lishaet-ego-prava-na-territoriyu-donbassa-schitayut-v-narodnom-sovete.html, accessed 16 February 2016.

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Identity since 1991

Much of this culture persists. A majority of 57% in the Donbas still regretted the fall of the USSR in 2013; and 69% supported a 'strong hand' in politics, 50% a planned economy and only 24% a free press.[17] The population is radically paternalist: only 17% thought they were responsible for their own fate and well-being, the rest thought the state should provide in varying degrees (Skorkin 2014, p. 28). There was a local strike movement in the late Soviet era and the very early 1990s, but it was soon replaced by the paternalism of the local 'red directors' backed by local mafias. Consequently, 'the idea of self-organisation was discredited' by the late 1990s (Skorkin 2014, p. 28).

However, the whole tenor of academic debate from 1991 to 2013 was not about (potential) separatism, or rivalry between Ukrainian ethnic nationalism and some kind of Donbas equivalent, but about the extent to which a social and regional Donbas identity was compatible with various forms of internal Ukrainian pluralism or civic identity (Hrytsak 1998, 2007). In the early 1990s Soviet and social identities (of workers and retired people) remained dominant. Then, 'during the next ten years, these identities faded away, and it was the regional identity of *Donets'kie* (Donets'kites) that has firmly asserted itself on the top' (Hrytsak 2009, p. 17). Regional identities can be nested, they can be overlapping, they can promote separatisms, but the consensus was that the Donbas had a 'borderland' identity, not an irredentist one (Vermenych 2015). From 1994 to 2004, the number in Donets'k city whose primary identity was 'Soviet' declined from 40.1% to 9.9%. The numbers stressing the social identities of 'worker' or 'pensioner' stayed reasonably high, only falling from 66.4% to 54.5%. The number identifying with the Donbas region was already the highest, at 55.7% in 1994, before rising further to 69.5% in 2004. The number of self-declared 'Ukrainians' went up a little, from 39.4% to 42.7%; while the number of 'Russians' fell from 30.1% to 21.1%. In between the last Soviet census in 1989 and the only one undertaken in post-Soviet Ukraine in 2001, the population of Donets'k region changed from 50.7% Ukrainian in 1989 to 56.9% in 2001, with the number of Russians falling from 43.6% to 38.2%. In Luhans'k, the number of Ukrainians grew from 51% to 58%, and the number of Russians fell from 44.8% to 39%.[18] This was interpreted as only partly due to migration, and mainly to ethnic re-identification. Though the Eastern Slavs of all three types (Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians) have a tendency to identify with local state power, so these processes would have been easy to erode after 2014. The 'Orthodox' rose and fell, from 31.2% up to 35.4% and then back to 27.7% (Hrytsak 2007, p. 50). Donets'k city was the centre of a local Muslim revival. Local intellectuals like Yevgenii Yasenov (2008) celebrated the diversity of local identity, including its Scythian and 'Welsh' pasts (Donets'k was founded by a Welshman, John Hughes, in 1869), and its embryonic modernisation and sporting success.[19]

This type of regionalism did not seem fundamentally incompatible with Ukrainian unity. The same surveys that showed the rise of the regional identity showed 'Ukrainian' or the more civic idea of 'citizen of Ukraine' rising from second to third place (Hrytsak 2007, p. 50). In

[17]'Kil'ka tez pro tsinnisni oriientyry ukraïntsiv', Rating Group Ukraine, 5 June 2013, available at: http://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/neskolko_tezisov_o_cennostnyh_orientirah_ukraincev.html, accessed 21 March 2016.

[18]'About Number and Composition Population of UKRAINE by Data All-Ukrainian Population Census'2001 Data' (sic), available at: http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/, accessed 13 January 2016.

[19]See also Yasenov's website, available at: donjetsk.com.

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Donets'k the number agreeing with the statement, 'The unity of Ukraine is more important than the needs of separate regions' rose from 44.5% in 1994 to 73.1% in 2004. The number agreeing with the statement that 'My region has a common fate with the rest of Ukraine' rose from 70.9% to 74.2%. Though (contradictory) ambivalence was visible as usual; the number saying 'My region would be richer if it was not part of Ukraine' rose from 22.8% to 47.8% (Chernysh & Malanchuk 2007, p. 89).

The younger generation in the Donbas was shifting most quickly to a civic identity. Fewer younger people considered the Ukrainian language to be their native tongue (10.5% compared to the oldest generation's 21.7%), but Soviet identity was in sharp decline (9.2% for the youngest generation, 36.1% for the oldest, despite some rising nostalgia for the USSR in the 2000s amongst those young enough not to remember the worst of its privations). The number considering themselves to be a 'citizen of Ukraine' rose from 39.8% in the oldest generation to 61.8% in the youngest (Chernysh 2007, pp. 112–14), though this more inclusive, political or civic understanding of the nation was never as successful as it should have been in Ukraine as a whole.

More recently, Michael Gentile has argued that blurred identities were being replaced by slightly sharper Ukrainian and Russian/East Slavic identities. Ethnic minorities were emerging at both ends of the spectrum, but identities were also driven by geopolitical attitudes, rather than the other way around (Gentile 2015). Arguably, these were more susceptible to manipulation (see below). On the one hand, this provided a slightly stronger baseline for pro-Russian mobilisation, but also grew a pro-Ukrainian group who were isolated and intimated, and ultimately left the region after March 2014, reversing the tentative, and contradictory, signs of rapprochement before 2013. Moreover, such trends were still tentative. It was because local identities were still relatively blurred that they were so quickly instrumentalised from the spring of 2014 onwards.

During 23 years of Ukrainian independence from 1991 to 2014, observers were not blind to tensions between Kyiv and the Donbas, but they were rightly calibrated below the serious threat of mass support for separatism. Even at the height of the previous crisis in 1994, in a consultative vote organised by local elites, locals demanded not independence or even autonomy, but the use of Russian as a state language, both locally and nationally, the federalisation of Ukraine and Ukraine's membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (Arel & Wilson 1994, p. 15).

Polarisation did increase after the Orange Revolution in 2004. Viktor Yanukovych's first attempt at the presidency crystallised a tendency towards 'Galician intellectual reductionism' and the negative stereotyping of the Donbas (Portnov 2014). This theme took on a new intensity once the war began, and Ukrainians from the west and Kyiv deepened their stereotyping of the Donbas with pejorative neologisms like 'Lugandon', 'Luganda', 'Ugandon' and 'Donbabve'—that is, Donets'k and Luhans'k as Uganda or Zimbabwe (Mokrushyna 2015). Increasingly, the theme, and its opposite—the demonisation of 'fascist' west Ukraine—was taken up by 'political technologists' in an eight year series of elections (2004, 2006, 2007, 2010 and 2012) as a means of territorialising the vote, securing power and hiding their clients' corruption. 'Anti-fascist' stereotyping of west Ukraine was therefore on the rise in the Donbas

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even before 2014 (see below). Analytically, it is hard to disentangle the effect of bottom-up stereotyping and top-down propaganda, but it can be said that the Donbas elite was more responsible for anti-west Ukrainian propaganda than its counterparts were for the anti-east Ukrainian equivalent, first in the campaigns of 2006 and 2007 and then under Yanukovych. The 'Orange' governments of 2005 and 2007–2010 were, however, responsible for the own failings, and both sides deployed extremely negative PR in the close-fought 2010 election. Under Yanukovych, the authorities played both sides; there is considerable evidence that they covertly supported the rise of the new Ukrainian nationalist party *Svoboda* to create an easily defeatable 'scarecrow' for their own supporters in the east (Shekhovtsov 2013). This propaganda was often organised by Russian citizens, but was also the main theme of the so-called 'Komsomol group' in the Party of Regions, such as the head of the Rada faction and self-styled 'boss' of Luhans'k, Oleksandr Yefremov (Skorkin 2014, p. 29). Research from the Ukrainian sociologists of KIIS, measuring alignment with the key tropes of Russian media coverage, has shown that the Donbas was the Ukrainian region most susceptible to Russian propaganda.[20] It would be fruitful to track changes in public opinion once rebels began switching off Ukrainian television from April 2014. Before then, one poll showed roughly equal but low faith in Ukrainian mass media (34%) and Russian (24%), but a third distrusting all media (Kipen' 2014).

The Komsomol group also overlapped with openly pro-Russian groups such as the Donets'k Republic established in 2005 (Shekhovtsov 2014), or the Luhans'k anti-Fascist Forum in May 2013, with links to Moscow political technologist Sergei Markov. But both promoted a new brand of Donbas identity, and this small minority of locals were not as local as they seemed. Many were trained at the annual Donuzlav camp of Russian-organised 'Eurasianists' in the Crimea—the 2013 event was the seventh.[21] But the kind of Russian-sponsored Russian nationalism represented by Nataliya Vitrenko and the Russian Block were still unsuccessful at elections: Vitrenko won 2.9% of the vote in Donets'k in the 2007 elections, the Russian Block 0.4% in 2012.

Separatist ideologues in the Donbas, such as they are, have therefore produced a strange melange since 2014. Of what Marlène Laruelle (2016) has called the 'three colours' of Russian nationalism designed for export—red (Soviet), white (Orthodox) and brown (fascist)—none is a natural fit for the Donbas. The myths and imagery of local Sovietness (Cadioli 2014; Edwards 2014) were originally embedded in a broader fraternity trope; the slogan that 'the Donbas feeds the USSR' was a claim to self-importance, but also of self-sacrifice. The successor slogan that 'the Donbas feeds Ukraine' became embedded in particular anti-western, 'anti-fascist' myths of economic exploitation by Kyiv and west Ukraine, west Ukrainian guest workers (*zarobitchany*) and international capital—the last being necessary cover for the fact that it was actually the Yanukovych 'Family' and allied oligarchs who were the real exploiters. The local myth of Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War has been revisited with renewed vigour since 2014. The DNR celebrated the 71st anniversary of liberation from Nazi occupation on 8 September 2014,[22] and tried to link it to the Minsk Agreement, despite the fact that the

[20]'Indeks rezul'tatyvnosti rosiis'koï propahandy', *KIIS*, 25 March 2015, available at: http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=510&page=1, accessed 16 February 2016.

[21]'VII Mezhdunarodnyi lager' v Krymu "Donuslav-2013"', *Vkontakte*, August 2013, available at: http://vk.com/club56144396, accessed 22 March 2016.

[22]'Den' osvobozhdeniya Donbassa. Zhiteli Novorossii nesut tsvety na Saur-Mogilu (foto, video)', *Russkaya Vesna*, 8 September 2014, available at: http://rusvesna.su/news/1410205838, accessed 16 February 2016.

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great tank battles of 1943 were fought against the Wehrmacht, not the 'phantom existential threat in the shape of "Ukrainian fascists"' (Pakhomenko & Podybaylo 2013; Osipian 2015) on which DNR–LNR propaganda has been primarily based.

The admixture of militant Orthodoxy can partly be explained by the presence of the same 'enemy'—fascist, Catholic, west Ukrainians (Flanagin 2015). But religion was never a big factor in Donbas society, though that is arguably what has allowed militant Russian Orthodoxy to displace and persecute other religions since 2014.[23] None of the prominent leaders of the DNR and LNR are real Orthodox activists. Lastly, on 'brown' nationalism, there are arguably more real fascists on the rebel side than the Ukraine side; and their presence will cause some cognitive dissonance in the longer term (Mitrokhin 2015a, 2015b).

The fact that some locals have adopted a morphed Russian–Orthodox–Soviet absolutist nationalism that Ukrainians have dubbed *Rashyzm*, itself an awkward amalgam of minority views, was due to outside factors and a minority group taking over. To some other Ukrainians, the locals are therefore 'victims of Stockholm Syndrome' or 'captive to an extremely dangerous quasi-religious psychosis, eschatological dream about "Heavenly New Russia"' (Skorkin 2014, p. 29). A more subtle explanation would be that the millennial elements are necessary to mask the ideological contradictions, and that ambiguous identities left many locals open to the kind of left–right eclecticism that is argued to be part of local culture (Skorkin 2014). It should be pointed out that this also means that Ukrainian intellectuals are wrong when they argue that the political culture of the Donbas has always been toxically anti-Ukrainian (Portnov 2014).

Redefining the 'master cleavage'

Russian sponsorship of separatism in 2014 and the day-to-day realities of conflict soon worked to harden opinion on the ground, but that is the opposite of the claim that such sentiments were widespread enough to create the separatist movement in the first place. The local population in rebel territories is likely to gravitate towards what Stathis Kalyvas calls a new and much more explicitly anti-Ukrainian 'master cleavage', but only after it had been redefined by local elites, ideologues and political entrepreneurs (Kalyvas 2006).

As argued above, the local population before the war contained some baseline separatism, but it was not a predominant sentiment and there was minimal evidence of support for armed uprising. The local elite ran the country. The Donbas was therefore subsidised at election time, though not at especially generous levels, while the Donbas elite continued its path to self-enrichment. Local incomes were 21% above the Ukrainian average, but there were plenty of hidden, or not-so-hidden, socio-economic problems. Almost a third, between 30% and 31%, of local income came from pensions. Life expectancy was one year less than the Ukrainian average. The population of Luhans'k had fallen by 21.6% and that of Donets'k by 18.3%. Official unemployment was low, but only 65% of 18–65 year-olds were economically active in Donets'k and 63.7% in Luhans'k. Donets'k had lost 332,000 jobs in the decade before 2013, Luhans'k had lost 554,000 (Libanova *et al*. 2015, pp. 9–11). When the local

[23]'Human Rights Activists Published Evidences of Religious Persecution in the Occupied Donbas', *Institute for Religious Freedom*, Kyiv, 13 May 2015, available at: www.irf.in.ua/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=431:1&catid=34:ua&Itemid=61, accessed 18 February 2016.

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elite were threatened by the Euromaidan events, locals initially reacted in characteristically ambivalent fashion: many feared the loss of even meagre subsidies, many looked to Russia for salvation, and many campaigned against local oligarchs. According to local sociologist Oksana Mikheieva:

> This specific ambivalence of Donbas residents was exploited … the events of 2014 almost completely closed social elevators. People totally without rights or prospects (none of the security forces protected the average person), poverty, the denial of human dignity—all of this pushed people to the limit. And all this discontent, because of the same ambivalence of ordinary residents of the Donbas, was able to be directed against the Maidan, its values, mythical 'Banderites' and so on, because technologically it could have been channelled in any direction. This was a serious miscalculation by the Ukrainian state—at the time when Russian actors were working in full force in the Donbas, no one was working from the pro-Ukrainian territories with the Donbas. Moreover, there were no messages as to what the Donbas could expect next, what its status in the new Ukraine would be, what would change and how. All this caused fear of the future and a search for defence in strength (working with paternalistic attitudes that have always been strong in the Donbas).[24]

According to an extensive opinion poll conducted throughout eastern and southern Ukraine in April 2014, only 27.5% in Donets'k and 30.3% in Luhans'k backed the separatist cause, and only 11.9% and 13.2% definitely in each case.[25] Another poll in March 2014, this time in Donets'k alone, showed a similar picture. A total of 31.6% supported separatist options (8.7% favoured Ukraine joining Russia or a restored USSR, 18.2% backed Donets'k joining Russia, and 4.7% wanted it to be independent). But 50.2% favoured 'Ukrainian' options (18.6% the *status quo* of a unitary Ukraine, 31.6% opted for more decentralisation). In the middle, 15.5% backed a federal Ukraine, though almost half saw that as implying a right to separation (Kipen' 2014). Ambivalence and distance were also still prominent. Similar figures said they would support the Russian (21.5%) and Ukrainian armies (20.9%) if there was conflict, but 46.2% would remain neutral. Larger numbers were against anything that increased the threat of destabilisation: 26.5% thought pro-Russian meetings were fully legitimate, but the figure for meetings in support of 'Ukrainian unity' was 40.8%. Large majorities were against the occupation of government buildings (77%) and the raising of the Russian flag on such buildings (70%).

It obviously became more difficult to conduct meaningful surveys in territories once they were controlled by the Russians and the DNR and LNR. But a Democratic Initiatives poll in March–April 2015 in areas of Luhans'k under restored Ukrainian control, comparing the towns of Severodonets'k and Starobils'k, showed that 64% and 61% still saw their future as part of Ukraine. A mere 1% supported independence for the DNR and LNR; only 5% backed union with Russia in Severodonets'k and 2% in Starobils'k. Rather more in Starobils'k blamed the current leadership of Ukraine for the situation (58%), as opposed to the Yanukovych elite (49%) or Russia (41%). In Severodonets'k, 39% blamed Russia, 38% the Yanukovych elite and 16% the current Ukrainian leadership.[26]

[24] Author's email conversation with Oksana Mikheieva, local sociologist, 8 January 2016.

[25] 'Mneniia i vzgliady zhitelei yugo-vostoka Ukrainy: aprel' 2014', *Zn.ua* (Dzerkalo tyzhnia), 18 April 2014, available at: http://zn.ua/UKRAINE/mneniya-i-vzglyady-zhiteley-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-aprel-2014-143598_.html, accessed 16 February 2016.

[26] 'Luhanshchyna: bil' i nadiia', *Democratic Initiatives*, 2015, available at: http://dif.org.ua/ua/mass_media/ygsyujmvzsrtjklkjbf.htm, accessed 18 February 2016.

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In another poll in Kyiv-controlled areas of Donets'k region in late 2014, in the towns of Slov"ians'k and Kramators'k, 50% still wanted to be part of Ukraine, as against 20% who backed independence and 15% union with Russia (Coynash 2015). However, both towns voted heavily for the pro-Russian Opposition Block in the local elections in 2015. And in a broader poll in late 2014 only 15.6% in Donets'k saw the DNR as a legitimate power, 6.1% fully and 9.5% basically—not that much higher than the figure of 6.7% in Ukraine as a whole—though 23.3% of locals 'supported' the DNR. Only 18.5% supported union with Russia, 4.6% fully and 13.9% basically.[27] Another survey by KIIS in occupied Donets'k in March 2015 (with a poll of only 200) showed only 42% supporting secessionist options (16% for independence and 26% for annexation to Russia), but 51% for versions of Ukrainian unity (15% for the old *status quo* and 36% for autonomy within Ukraine).[28] An IRI poll of Kyiv-controlled Donbas in November 2015 (1,284 were over-sampled in Donets'k and Luhans'k) showed 75% supporting three options of Ukrainian unity, including the *status quo*, decentralisation and special regional autonomy, compared to 86% nationwide.[29]

This picture is once again mixed, both in the areas of the Donbas that ended up in rebel control and those that did not by 2015. In the liberated Donbas there was no militant pro-Ukrainian mood, but little sympathy for the rebel side either. Support for separatism in areas newly re-controlled by Kyiv had barely changed since the March 2014 baseline, which can be taken as evidence for the importance of local leadership by militias and others, who were clearly in advance of public opinion.

But at least one other opinion poll finding presented a starker picture. In late March 2014 locals were asked to identify the 'main threat to inhabitants of the Donbas' (Kipen' 2014). A large number, 60.5%, opted for 'radically-minded inhabitants of Western Ukraine—"Banderites"'. 'The central power in Kiev' was mentioned by 46.7%, and 'European and American politicians' by 37.9%. That meant that between 40% and 60% were convinced by the trope of threats emanating from the west. Characteristically, the threat from the east was also mentioned: 22.8% named 'citizens of Russia who take part in organising pro-Russian meetings' and 21% named 'Russian politicians and military'. But only a smaller number named local threats, with 16.8% citing 'criminal circles of the Donbas', 11.2% 'radically minded' locals, and 11% 'regional powers'. But the high number seeing the primary threat as coming from the west is notable, most likely because of the triple effect of Russian propaganda reinforcing the similar message from the Party of Regions, and the alienating effect of anti-Donbas discourse from Ukrainian nationalist circles since 2004.

The role of local elites in mobilisation and revolt

This essay has argued that history and identity were 'baseline' factors, and were not enough in themselves to explain the outbreak of war in 2014. Two other factors were required: elites enabled the protests and helped fuel their escalation, even if they did not directly lead them;

[27] 'Takoi raznyi Yugo-Vostok', *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, 26 December 2014, available at: http://opros2014.zn.ua/donbass, accessed 16 February 2016.

[28] *The Ukrainian People on the Current Crisis*, Kiev International Institute of Sociology and Program for Public Consultation, 9 March 2015, available at: www.public-consultation.org/studies/Ukraine_0315.pdf, accessed 16 February 2016.

[29] 'Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine, November 19–30, 2015', *IRI*, available at: www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015_11_national_oversample_en_combined_natl_and_donbas_v3.pdf, accessed 16 February 2016.

and Russian intervention was decisive in turning a civil conflict into an actual war. As Andrii Portnov argues: 'the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas are still more frequently described using the categories of "identity" and "historical rights" than through a careful analysis of the behaviour of key actors (above all, the local elites and the Russian intervention)' (Portnov 2015a). We concur with this view: elites and the resources they provided were the keys to converting a marginal movement into a mass phenomenon.

Serhiy Kudelia attempted to identify the political factors behind the separatist movement as 'state fragmentation, violent regime change, and the government's low coercive capacity' (Kudelia 2014). As previously stated, however, the extent of 'state fragmentation' at the time is exaggerated; violence in Kyiv was disproportionally on the side of the outgoing government, and largely self-limiting on the protestors' side, although the threat of violence spreading from Kyiv was an important element of local discourse in the Donbas. In Donets'k in April 2014, 22.5% were worried by the 'growth of radicalism and nationalism', and 40.6% by the 'threat of civil war', compared to 51.5% concerned about the 'rise of banditism in the country'; 24.5% worried about losing their job and 9.4% about the 'imposition of one language'.[30] By September 2014, 46.3% in the Donbas felt threatened by 'the growth of extremism', compared to 47.7% who felt threatened by 'external armed aggression'—which was the main factor named by 96.9% in west Ukraine.[31]

The government's coercive capacity in the Donbas was still high in early 2014—although it would soon change sides as it was taken over by pro-Russian forces. The Donbas militia was perfectly able to coerce protest, in the form of the pro-Maidan protestors in January and February—and brutally, often using local mafia as auxiliaries—but did the opposite when pro-Russian protests began in the spring. Conversely, the police failed to protect rival demonstrations in support of Ukrainian unity (Yeremenko 2015). The authorities also failed to control the border as crowds were artificially inflated by bussed in demonstrators and hooligans from Russia. Some officials were permissive, others organised crowds themselves. The new authorities in Kyiv disbanded the paramilitary Berkut (4,000 men) and released huge numbers of police for 'non-compliance with their oath' (17,000 locally), creating a huge poll of potential separatist recruits with nothing to lose (Malyarenko 2015).[32] Demonstrators followed political signalling by elites, particularly because demonstrations in the Donbas had a tradition of being organised and paid for. On the other hand, this was also the case in Kyiv before November 2013, and Euromaidan protestors managed to break with that tradition. There is no intrinsic reason why demonstrations in the Donbas could not also be spontaneous, so the extent to which elite money and organisation helped them to get off the ground remains controversial (Shynkarenko 2014), so is still a subject worthy of further research.

Kudelia's (2014) description of 'the diffusion of resistance tactics used by Euromaidan activists and later adopted by the emergent separatist movement' is a misnomer. Euromaidan tactics were crudely 'cloned' and distorted, not reflected back. Public meetings in the Donbas where a handful of activists of unknown origin noisily elected a 'mayor' were completely

[30] 'Mneniia i vzgliady zhitelei yugo-vostoka Ukrainy: aprel' 2014', *Zn.ua* (Dzerkalo tyzhnia), 18 April 2014, available at: http://zn.ua/UKRAINE/mneniya-i-vzglyady-zhiteley-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-aprel-2014-143598_.html, accessed 16 February 2016.

[31] 'Hromadiany Ukraïny pro bezpeku: otsinky, zahrozy, shliakhy vyrishennia problem', Razumkov Centre, 2014, available at: www.uceps.org/upload/1412757450_file.pdf, accessed 18 February 2016.

[32] 'Avakov uvolil 17 tysych mililtsionerov Donbassa za izmenu prisiage', *Khvylia*, 18 October 2014, available at: http://hvylya.net/news/digest/avakov-uvolil-17-tyisyach-militsionerov-donbassa-za-izmenu-prisyage.html, accessed 18 February 2016.

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different from the mass protests seen in Kyiv which noisily criticised all politicians from afar rather than assuming to take their place. They were also different from the ill-advised 'Viche' (Ukrainian for 'popular assembly') when the new government in Kyiv was paraded before the Maidan on 26 February 2014. This was a populist exercise in booing or cheering new ministers already chosen—not electing or self-selecting them. DNR–LNR activists used a permissive argument—if they can do it in Kyiv, we can do it here—but they were not doing the same thing.

As Umland (2014) has pointed out, any properly political analysis should consider the organising role of elites. In reality, the Yanukovych 'Family' provided key resources for the separatist movement (Serbina 2014; Shybalov 2014). The first key resource was money, channelled in by Oleksandr Yanukovych and others. The 'Family' fled to Russia with plenty of cash, but Oleksandr's enterprises—like MAKO (his main holding company) and the All-Ukrainian Development Bank—carried on working in Donets'k and distributed money to the separatists. Money was also channelled through the steel (Donetskstal') and coke plants owned by oligarch Viktor Nusenkis, a Russian citizen, but born in the Donbas, and long-time associate of Viktor Yanukovych.[33] In October 2014 allegations were made in a Kyiv court that Oleksandr Yanukovych and the 'Family' curator Serhii Arbuzov had directly financed the initial separatist protests.[34]

The networks controlled by the 'Family' were just as important as its money. The local police and security services were appointed to guard the interests of the 'Family', not to uphold the law. Oleksandr Yanukovych was responsible for intimidating them to cooperate with the separatists. The 'Family' also had long experience with assembling crowds with cash payments and 'administrative resources' and with local mafia, who were important for providing physical force in early 'civic' demonstrations before the conflict reached a military phase (Wilson 2014, pp. 127–28). Rustam Temirgaliev, deputy prime minister of occupied Crimea, described such operations in dry technical terms; it was just a matter of being professional: 'There are organisational issues—printing flags, banners, the payment of foremen who collected people. It all required a certain cost' (Kozlov 2016).

Local oligarchs played a more complicated role. The richest of them, Rinat Akhmetov, had not fled like the 'Family'. Preserving his business empire under enormous pressure was his main priority, as well as maintaining his leverage in Kyiv (Kazanskyi 2015).[35] Akhmetov also had a large role in controlling the local police and city mayors in his factory towns. Initially, his supporters helped to assemble crowds. He then used his links to the local security services (SBU) and fight clubs like Oplot to try and protect his business interests as the situation on the ground deteriorated. Aleksandr Zakharchenko, self-styled 'Prime Minister' of the DNR, had

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[33]'Yanukovych i Nusenkis finansuit' dial'nist' ohrupyvannia DNR—ZMI', *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, 18 June 2015, available at: http://dt.ua/UKRAINE/yanukovich-i-nusenkis-finansuyut-diyalnist-ugrupovannya-dnr-zmi-176337_.html, accessed 18 February 2016.

[34]'Pechers'kyi sud zniav aresht iz rakhunkiv Arbuzova—ZMI', *Tyzhden.ua*, 29 November 2014, available at: http://tyzhden.ua/News/124710, accessed 18 February 2016.

[35]'Il Paperone dell'Ucraina offre una soluzione a Putin', *Il Giornale*, 9 April 2014, available at: www.ilgiornale.it/news/esteri/paperone-dellucraina-offre-soluzione-putin-1008950.html, accessed 18 February 2016.

originally led the local Oplot that helped to suppress local Euromaidan protests.[36] At the start of the protests, his role seemed to be more protecting local politicians linked to Akhmetov (Kalashnikov 2015).

Defections or demonstrative passivity were commonplace among local police and security forces when the separatists were taking over local police buildings (Shuster 2014). The central government arguably had the capacity to retake key buildings after rebel 'stormings', but key opportunities were missed. The security forces were not absent, they were paralysed (Portnov 2016). Some were bribed to 'turn a blind eye' (Tymchuk 2014). By late 2014 Akhmetov was allegedly supplying the DNR and LNR with food in return for keeping his remaining businesses open (Kazanskyi 2015).

But there were also some 'bottom-up' grievances. The Donbas rebellion was both manipulated by local elites and directed against them, thanks to a highly clientelistic local political culture, shaped just as much by post-independence clan politics as longer-term historical factors. According to Nikolai Mitrokhin, the initial separatist coalition was heavily biased towards middle and lower strata of society: the 'main strike forces were small criminal groups (and "*gopniki*" attracted by them as reinforcements), who hoped to get rid not only of the Ukrainian authorities, but also of the old Mafia giants' (Mitrokhin 2015b).[37] In Mitrokhin's words:

> The political and economic elite of the region, which is the core of the Party of Regions, obviously did not want to join the Donbas to Russia, which would mean the redistribution of property and other troubles. For small businessmen, criminal figures, officials (mostly associated with the most criminalised sectors of the economy), and district-level police officers such radical political changes, on the contrary, gave great hope. (Mitrokhin 2015b)

Mitrokhin, however, misreads the motives of the 'Family' at least. While elites in Kharkiv and Odesa were prepared to limit their support for separatism in return for Kyiv's acquiescence in their continued local power (Portnov 2016), in Dnipropetrovsk, local elites saw an opportunity to expand their power by parlaying their military support for Kyiv on the front line (Portnov 2015b). Mitrokhin may be right that the rational course for Donbas elites was not to risk dispossession under Russian or rebel rule, but they gambled. Moreover, playing both sides had been a political strategy that had worked for them in the past.

The role of Russia

It is not yet possible to judge whether the 'Family' would have fomented revolt anyway, without Russian support. Viktor Yanukovych backed away from declaring an alternative capital in the east in Kharkiv on 22 February 2014. But the origins of the separatist movement reflected the logic of 'Phantom States' laid out by Daniel Byman and Charles King (2012), where it is the relationship between 'peripheral elites' and 'external patrons' that matters. The

[36] 'Zanesennyi vetrom. Kak elektromekhanik Zakharchenko vozglavil DNR', *Novoe vremia*, 4 March 2015, available at: http://nv.ua/publications/zanesennyy-vetrom-kak-elektromehanik-zaharchenko-vozglavil-dnr-37195.html, accessed 18 February 2016; 'Terrorist DNR rasskazal o sotrudnichesstve glavaria Zakharchenko s Akhmetovym i o razborkakh s "neogodnymi",—video', *IPress.Ua*, 19 March 2015, available at: http://ipress.ua/ru/news/terroryst_dnr_rasskazal_o_sotrudnychestve_glavarya_zaharchenko_s_ahmetovim_y_o_razborkah_s_neugodnimy__vydeo_115612.html, accessed 18 February 2016.

[37] 'Gopnik' is a slang term for alienated post-Soviet urban youth.

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external patron was of course Russia; peripheral elites in the Donbas were active in seeking out its assistance, but Russia was an active player, trying different sparks until one caught light. The first Donbas demonstrations in March 2014, even when violent, and even when reinforced by Russians bussed in from outside, and with the central Ukrainian state caught off guard, failed to achieve as much as was expected. As stated by the Atlantic Council: 'buying into its own propaganda, the Kremlin believed that providing leadership, money, and weapons would be enough to spark a local rebellion against Kyiv in the Donbas'. 'But the locals did not rise to the task: numerous intercepts from Girkin-Strelkov made clear that he asked Moscow to send more and more "volunteers" to sustain the rebellion' (Czuperski *et al*. 2015, pp. 4–5). The idea that Russian forces only arrived in August 2014 (Sakwa 2015, pp. 155, 175) contradicts abundant evidence. Nikolai Mitrokhin's study of 'infiltration, instruction [and] invasion' (Mitrokhin 2015a) identifies the August escalation as a third phase:

> The first phase began in April 2014, when special forces (*spetsnaz*) troops and secret service officials supported criminals from the Donbas region and Russian nationalists who had travelled in from Russia with the aim of seizing power in several cities in the Donbas region, as part of a Russian special operation aimed at destabilising Ukraine. (Mitrokhin 2015a, pp. 220–21)

One Ukrainian website, informnapalm.org, has tried to document the escalating Russian presence. 'Tourists', that is Russians bussed in from over the border, were always part of the early demonstrations. Another site, Information Defence (sprotyv.info), has looked at the role of GRU agents (Russian external intelligence) in organising early protests and then coordinating militias into rebel armed forces—though more research is clearly needed to clarify their role.[38] In May 2015 the Ukrainians claimed to have the names of 60 GRU agents active in the Donbas since March 2014.[39] The detailed 2015 RUSI report (Sutyagin 2015),[40] confirms that a few hundred special forces and GRU in command-and-control functions were ever-present in the Donbas from March 2014, along with volunteers from Russia and specialist crews for advanced weaponry. Simple proximity to Russia was a key factor in facilitating the flow of both 'tourists' and GRU, even compared to Kharkiv, which has fewer urban centres than the Russian side of the nearby border.

The rapid appearance of so much weaponry is the most obvious sign of Russian involvement, and of escalation from civil conflict to civil war. Genuine domestic Ukrainian rebels at best only had access to some small arms, obtained when local militia stations were over-run. But the rebels soon had hundreds of tanks at their command. One Russian source counted 200 armoured vehicles by early August 2014.[41]

Secular Russian activists, that is Russian citizens from various Russian nationalist and Eurasian organisations, were also already in the Donbas at the same time (Kostromina 2015).

[38] 'O "turistakh" Putina ili voina malykh grupp', *Information Defence/Informatsionnoe soprotivlenie*, 30 July 2015, available at: http://sprotyv.info/ru/news/kiev/o-turistah-putina-ili-voyna-malyh-grupp, accessed 18 February 2016.

[39] 'SBU predstavila novye dokazatel'stva uchastiia voennykh GRU RF v agressii protiv Ukrainy', *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, 21 May 2015, available at: http://zn.ua/UKRAINE/sbu-predstavila-novye-dokazatelstva-uchastiya-voennyh-gru-rf-v-agressii-protiv-ukrainy-176822_.html, accessed 18 February 2016.

[40] See also Czuperski *et al*. (2015).

[41] 'Dlya kontrnastupleniya pod Donetskom opolchentsy podgotovili 200 bronemashin', *Vesti.ru*, 12 August 2014, available at: www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=1885210&tid=105474, accessed 18 February 2016.

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Many key early separatist leaders were Russian passport-holders: including Girkin, Antifeev, Bezler, Mozhaev, Motorola, Bashirov, Koryakin and Borodai. The extent to which all the local DNR and LNR leadership was subject to orders from Russian 'curators' is described in an ICG report (Sutyagin 2015).[42]

This 'first phase' had two parts, with the distinction between the two providing further evidence of the amount of artifice in the process. There was no mass uprising in March 2014, and the storming of local SBU (security service) buildings that began on 6 April was inconclusive until Igor Girkin arrived with 52 fighters in Slov"ians'k in the north west of the Donbas on 12 April. Girkin (aka Strelkov) himself later stated that 'I was the one who pulled the trigger of the war. … If our unit hadn't crossed the border, everything would have fizzled out—like in Kharkiv, like in Odesa'. But even in Slov"ians'k he admitted, 'At first, nobody wanted to fight' (Dolgov 2014).[43]

The second phase began with Girkin's complaint on 18 May that he was already short of men and arms leading up to his departure from Slov"ians'k on 4–5 July.[44] He had already been supplied with small arms, ammunition, MANPADS (shoulder-fired missiles) and ATGMs (anti-tank missiles) (Mitrokhin 2015b), but this proved insufficient. Mitrokhin (2015b) defines the four key features of the second phase as, first, a huge increase in the number of 'volunteers' from Russia in response to Girkin's appeal; second, the supply by Russia of more and more modern arms, including tanks, modern artillery and rocket launchers, one of which, according to overwhelming evidence, shot down flight MH17; third, shelling from over the border; and finally the participation of regular Russian units in the fighting by the end of July.[45] The third phase began when Ukrainian forces continued their advance and threatened supply lines from Russia, which would have been less of a concern to a genuinely local fighting force (Mitrokhin 2015a, pp. 220–21).

The presence of large numbers of regular Russian troops had been a constant feature since July 2014, but the exact number varied, depending on the task in hand. The balance between Russians and locals has been estimated by researchers examining data from social media, photographic evidence and border crossings, and movement in and out of Russian garrison towns, although such methods are clearly inexact (Gilley 2015). The initial pattern avoided sending ready-made units into battle, which would have been too conspicuous. Instead they were assembled from all over Russia; but ultimately whole battalion-sized tactical groups were committed for the big battles, meaning 10,000 regular Russian troops in Ukraine by the end of 2014, and 42,000 men in total, rotated in and out across the border, to keep frontline troops fresh and Ukraine and the West confused (Sutyagin 2015, p. 4). There were

[42]'Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter', Crisis Group Europe, Report No. 235, 18 December 2014, available at: www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/ukraine/235-eastern-ukraine-a-dangerous-winter.aspx, accessed 18 February 2016.

[43]'Girkin: "Opolchenstsi" zhanialy kryms'kykh deputativ do zaly dlia holosuvannia', *Krym.Realiï*, 24 January 2015, available at: http://ua.krymr.com/content/article/26811497.html, accessed 18 February 2016.

[44]'Obrashchenie Igorya Strelkova', *YouTube*, 17 May 2014, available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIHdrSm6jrU, accessed 18 February 2016.

[45]'MH17: Source of the Separatists' Buk: A Bellingcat Investigation', *Bellingcat*, November 2014, available at: www.bellingcat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Origin-of-the-Separatists-Buk-A-Bellingcat-Investigation1.pdf, accessed 18 February 2016; 'Bellingcat Report—Origin of Artillery Attacks on Ukrainian Military Positions in Eastern Ukraine Between 14 July 2014 and 8 August 2014', *Bellingcat*, 17 February 2015, available at: www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/02/17/origin-of-artillery-attacks/, accessed 18 February 2016; 'MH17—Potential Suspects and Witnesses from the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade', *Bellingcat*, 23 February 2016, available at: www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2016/02/23/53rd-report-en/, accessed 24 March 2016.

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also between 26,000 and 28,000 Russian troops in a now heavily militarised Crimea. The number of Russian dead was 800 by early 2015, according to one source (Crowley 2015),[46] or 220 according to the Nemtsov Report (Nemtsov 2015, pp. 24–31). The number of Russian nationalist volunteers from Russia was several hundred (Yudina 2014). Local fighters were provided with Russian uniforms by June 2014; significantly, kit from the time of the Chechen and Georgian wars was used.

Mitrokhin (2015a, pp. 238–39) estimates that by mid-August 2014, before the decisive battle at Ilovais'k often cited as a one-off Russian intervention, there were between 20,000 and 25,000 troops fighting in the Donbas, and only between 40% and 45% were 'locals'. The Nemtsov Report questioned how many of the 30,000 Russians who had served in the Donbas at one time or another were 'volunteers or mercenaries?', as it claims monthly pay in the early stages of the fighting, before later inflation, was between 60,000 and 90,000 rubles, which produced a steady stream of fighters, but cast doubt on their motivations (Nemtsov 2015, pp. 24–31). In one sense, Russia's role was actually reduced after August 2014, because the Kremlin wanted to create an impression of 'indigenisation'. According to one commentator, 'rebel formations in essence have been used as cannon fodder' (Sutyagin 2015, p. 7). Mitrokhin (2015b) argues that 'the local pro-Russian political activists' were 'the most insignificant military and most important politically'; Russian troops from Russia did the hard fighting when necessary, but the local Donbas troops provided indispensable political cover.

Conclusions

Historical and identity factors have been extensively cited as key explanations of the separatist movement in the Donbas. However, neither the creation of the DNR and LNR nor the war would have happened without resources. These came from Russia and from the Yanukovych 'Family' and some allied oligarchs. The changes undergone by the local state apparatus also made it much easier for the Russians to intervene; but there was no total state collapse—more a combination of state weakness, neglect by Kyiv, defections and disloyalty, the hollowing out of the system by Yanukovych 'Family' elites both still in the Donbas and in Russia, and decisions that backfired, like disbanding the Berkut and dismissing so many from the local police. The local state was weak, but far from collapsed; it was also permissive and enabling.

Local opinion was malleable to an extent, allowing the leadership of the DNR and LNR to increase their initial support. But their leaders were never an autonomous force, and were repeatedly changed at Russian instigation. The war that began in 2014 was not a civil war with foreign intervention, but a process catalysed and escalated by local elites and by Russia, with local foot-soldiers. The last word could be given to President Lukashenka of Belarus, who declared in October 2014, 'let's be honest, the days of the DNR and LNR would have been numbered long ago without Russia'.[47]

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[46]See also Urban (2015).
[47]'Lukashenko: Dni DPR i LPR bez Rossii davno bylo by sochteny', *Belaplan*, 17 October 2014, available at: http://belapan.com/archive/2014/10/17/734133/, accessed 18 February 2016.

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