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Games with frontiers: identity politics in Eastern Ukraine

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This article on how identity affects separatism in eastern Ukraine summarises key points from a Thesis submitted for the Master of Studies in International Relations, Cambridge University, 2015–2017 by Yuri Bender of Robinson College, under supervision of Dr Rory Finnin, Associate Professor of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Cambridge.

My recent research on events leading to secession of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine and their subsequent attempts to function as statelets examined the influences of economics and identity, underpinned by Moscow's foreign policy in its 'near abroad.' Key economic factors in the statelets' temporary secession have played out against a backdrop of shifting identities and elite behaviours. Studying these is vital to determining whether the statelets have long-term autonomous futures. This article focuses on identity, with economic factors addressed elsewhere. Shifting and often conflicting multiple identities attached to the Donbas region, historically a resource-rich bolt-hole for political and economic refugees, are examined. In today's time of conflict, however, migrants are leaving Donbas rather than coming in. Paradoxically, the most entrepreneurial and educated citizens displaying the strongest identities — just the type necessary to build effective statelets — are those most likely to leave.

The conflict is observed through theoretical lenses including historian Hiroaki Kuromiya's 'Wild Field', contested by oligarchs, criminal gangs and political clans; and geographer Halford Mackinder's Euro-Asian 'Heartland', historically fought over Eastern and western powers. By drawing on semi-structured interviews carried out during my visits to Ukraine, I aim to contribute to discussion on future trajectory of Ukraine's troubled eastern borderlands and shed some light on their recent past. Detailed study of this geostrategic region could suggest lessons for key actors, including Russia, Ukraine and others in the international community, to learn from the ongoing conflict. Particularly important to policymakers is the issue of mixed identities, prevalent in much of eastern Ukraine.

Keywords: Akhmetov, Cossacks, DNR, Donbas, Donetsk, Dugin, elites, identity, kulaks, Kyiv, Luhansk, LNR, Makhno, oligarchs, paramilitaries, secession, separatism, Stalin, statelets, Strelkov, Surkov, Russia, Ukraine, Yanukovich.

ІГРИ З КОРДОНАМИ: ПОЛІТИКА ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ У СХІДНІЙ УКРАЇНІ

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У статті розглядається вплив ідентичності на сепаратизм на сході України, узагальнюються ключові моменти дисертації, поданої на ступінь магістра міжнародних відносин Кембриджського університету, 2015–2017 рр. Юрієм Бендером із коледжу Робінсона, під керівництвом доктора Рорі Фінніна, доцента кафедри українознавства Кембриджського університету.

Моє недавнє дослідження подій, що призвели до відокремлення так званої Донецької Народної Республіки та Луганської Народної Республіки на сході України та їхні подальші спроби функціонувати як окремі автономні регіони, ґрунтувалося на дослідженні впливу економіки та ідентичності, підкріплених зовнішньою політикою Москви в країнах «близького зарубіжжя». Ключові економічні чинники тимчасового відокремлення «автономних регіонів» відбувалися на тлі зміни ідентичності та елітарної поведінки. Вивчення цих питань є життєво важливим для визначення того, чи мають «республіки» довгострокове автономне майбутнє. Пропонована стаття присвячена ідентичності, а економічні чинники розглядатимуться деінде. Досліджуються змінні та часто суперечливі множинні ідентичності, закріплені за регіоном Донбасу, історично багатого на просторові ресурси для політичних та економічних біженців. Однак у теперішній конфліктний час мігранти все частіше покидають Донбас, а не в'їжджають в зазначений регіон. Як це не парадоксально, але найбільш підприємливі та освічені громадяни, які демонструють найсильніші прояви ідентичності — саме того типу, який необхідний для створення ефективної держави, — найімовірніше виїдуть.

Конфлікт розглядається через теоретичні призми, включаючи «Дике поле» історика Гіроакі Куромії, оскаржуване олігархами, злочинними угрупованнями та політичними кланами; та євро-азіатський «Хартленд» географа Халфорда Макіндера, що історично боровся та відстоював східні та західні держави. Спираючись на напівструктуровані інтерв'ю, проведені під час моїх візитів до України, я прагну внести свій внесок у дискусію щодо майбутньої траєкторії проблемних східних прикордонних територій України та пролити світло на їхнє недавнє минуле. Детальне вивчення цього геостратегічного регіону може запропонувати рішення для ключових суб'єктів, включно з Росією, Україною та іншими членами міжнародної спільноти, щоб винести урок з конфлікту, що триває. Особливо важливим для політиків є питання змішаних ідентичностей, поширених на більшій частині східної України.

Ключові слова: Ахметов, козаки, ДНР, Донбас, Донецьк, Дугін, еліта, ідентичність, куркулі, Київ, Луганськ, ЛНР, Махно, олігархи, воєнізовані форми, сецесія, сепаратизм, Сталін, державні утворення, Стрелков, Сурков, Росія, Україна, Янукович.

Introduction

*This place is kidnapped and betrayed
The noisy streets are swept
By a deadly northern storm
It used to be a city
But now it is a jail of hybrid hate.
– (Sereda, 2016).*

This stark poetry from Donetsk-born journalist Oleksandr Sereda, describes why he was forced to flee his native city, after local administration buildings were seized by armed pro-Russian groups expressing separatist intentions. Many, like Oleksandr — who settled in nearby cities under control of the Ukrainian government in Kyiv — share his view that Donetsk has been ‘kidnapped and betrayed’. Yet other eastern Ukrainians have different views of conditions in the areas of Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (administrative regions) now declared the “Donetsk Peoples’ Republic” (DNR) and “Luhansk Peoples’ Republic” (LNR). These self-styled statelets are at the centre of an ongoing war between the Ukrainian military and Russian and pro-Russian militants, directly affecting 3.5 per cent of Ukraine’s territory, according to the Ukraine Crisis Media Center in Kyiv. Recent reports from Belarus claim Donbas paramilitaries have been active in Minsk.

There are also different voices in Ukraine on whether Kyiv should attempt to re-integrate Donbas, giving it ‘special status,’ or allow the separatist entities to stagnate. Related challenges facing President Volodymyr Zelensky in 2020 include dealing with Covid transmission across frontiers, Russia’s militarisation of the Azov Sea and the emergence of controversial pro-Russian opposition politician and media tycoon Viktor Medvedchuk as self-styled peace broker.

Historical background

Such diverging outlooks testify to the complexity and diversity of Ukraine’s Donbas (‘Donets basin’) of which Donetsk and Luhansk form the central part. Home to 6.5 million of Ukraine’s 45.4 million population at the beginning of 2014, Donbas contributed 16 per cent of national GDP (Kirchner & Giucci, 2014).

Despite Western media generalisations of a primitive, Russian-leaning rustbelt, gripped by Soviet nostalgia, the Donbas is difficult to categorise. Until recently, densely populated, heavily industrialised and important both financially and geopolitically, this enigmatic, resource-rich borderland is far from homogenous ethnically, culturally or socio-economically. Its variety of actors and identities has historically fuelled political contes-

tation between Kyiv and Moscow, leading to uneasy relations with both regional power centres.

The Donbas emerged as nineteenth century powerhouse, when millions of political and economic refugees seeking jobs and higher income flocked to the frontier region's processing plants and collieries from across the Russian Empire and beyond. But the reputation of a bolthole offering freedom and anonymity, where Cossacks once roamed, led Moscow to treat it with suspicion for maintaining romantic traditions of Ukraine-born writer Nikolai Gogol's free steppe.

Throughout Jozef Stalin's brutal regime, the unruly enclave provided refuge 'to the disenfranchised, to outcasts, fugitives, criminals and others' (Kuromiya, 1998, pp. 2–3). More recently, in the post-Soviet, pre-2014 crisis period, it was perceived an 'anti-modern community, dominated by a "criminal-political" nexus of terrorising mafia gangs and political clans' (Mykhnenko, 2004).

Consequences of conflict

Donbas hit global headlines in February 2014, following the flight of Ukraine's then President Viktor Yanukovich, himself a Donbas native, to Russia. Subsequent annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation preceded seizure of assets in Donetsk and Luhansk by obscure and little-known militants declaring 'People's Republics.' The period since has been one of violent stalemate, with civilians braving daily artillery fire and freezing winter temperatures in crowded apartment blocks. To date, according to the UN, Donbas conflict deaths have exceeded 13,000, including several thousand civilians. Hundreds of missing individuals were held 'incommunicado', with UN monitors denied access to 'penal and pre-trial detention facilities' in areas controlled by armed groups and an average 25,000 people each day affected by 'disproportionate restrictions on freedom of movement across the contact line', dividing families and communities (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2016). Many of these are without water and heating, further hampered by a blockade of trading across the Contact Line, challenging the functioning of local economies.

Although I explored economic sustainability of the DNR and LNR in my longer-form study, a parallel consideration has been how their populations' multiple identities — including Ukrainian, post-Soviet, Russian and regional — have been crystallised by this ongoing conflict and how monitoring shifting loyalties can help inform our understanding of the prospects of future conflict escalation or reconciliation.

Research challenges

Due to the conflict's nature, this research was not straightforward. The DNR and LNR are not internationally recognised or secure territories. In-

ability to visit these self-styled statelets rendered it impossible to conduct interviews in non-government controlled areas, except by telephone, although I had visited Donbas regularly pre-2014. Instead, I conducted interviews at checkpoints on the conflict's Contact Line and discussed cross-frontier trade in face-to-face and phone conversations in Mariupol and other east Ukrainian cities, with people who crossed from separatist-controlled territories.

Although regular and irregular forces from the Russian Federation have frequently been identified in these territories since the conflict's onset (Czuperski et al, 2015; Kim, 2014), given the scope of this article, I cannot fully assess the extent of Russian involvement. I will therefore refer to the Donbas conflict as an ongoing attempt at non-consensual secession, defined as 'the unilateral withdrawal from a state or part of its territory and population with the will to create a new state,' (Christakis, 2012) but without the agreement of the parent state. I use the term 'statelet' to mean 'a small state, especially one that is closely affiliated to or has emerged from the break-up of a larger state' (Lexico, n.d.). As my research reveals, economic legitimacy and sustainability of these 'statelets' are structurally weak and overly dependent on Russian patronage, lacking any defining sense of identity.

In addition to consulting secondary and primary scholarship across disciplines, during several 2016 field trips to Ukraine I conducted more than 40 semi-structured interviews with elites as well as members of the general public, with particular emphasis on 'giving voice' to ordinary Ukrainians disenfranchised by a political and media system dominated by oligarchical interests. These voices, several of them featured in this article, will be crucial in determining the future of Ukraine, just as they have shaped recent and long-term history.

A perpetually contested 'heartland'

The conceptual frame of a 'wild field' prone to a scramble for resource extraction, criminality and political contestation is central to the work of Hiroaki Kuromiya, the most prominent international scholar of the Donbas region. As the western part of the Eurasian steppe grassland belt, connecting China through Central Asia and Ukraine to Hungary, the *dyke pole* ('wild field') formed 'a natural gateway to Europe for successive waves of nomadic horseman [sic] from Central Asia' (Mykhnenko, 2004, p. 5). This vast, open and difficult-to-control steppe was fought over for centuries by Slavs and nomadic peoples including Turkic-speaking Pechenegs and Kipchaks, followed by Tatars and eventually Zaporizhian Cossacks, who lived by hunting, fishing, agriculture, trading and traditional plunder (Kuromiya, 1998, p. 35).

Historical documents show authorities barely keeping a lid on the Donbas during deliberately-induced famine and Stalinist terror of the 1930s,

with Ukrainian, Greek and German farmers 'dekulakized', deported and replaced by Russians, leading to 'explosive' ethnic tensions (Kuromiya, 1998, p. 196). Russians and Ukrainians regularly swapped ethnic insults, arguing which language to speak, leading to fist and knife fights among miners. That these tensions could be ratcheted up by global and regional powers was first documented academically in 1904. Control of the Ukrainian steppe was key to geographer Halford Mackinder's notion of a Euro-Asian heartland, 'gripped between two pressures' of Asian horsemen and maritime Vikings. He predicted the region would be perpetually contested by geopolitical rivals, expecting the Russian empire's settlement of Ukraine's then barren steppe-land to trigger rapid, intense industrialisation, facilitated by proliferation of a concentrated railway network (Mackinder, 1904/2006, pp. 35–37).

Mackinder's predicted confrontations and shifting alliances among military actors, attempting to dilute Russia's long-term control of the Eurasian landmass, materialised to greatest extent in Donbas, disputed in conflicts of 1917, 1941 and 2014 onwards.

Academics have added ethnic and religious layers to post-Soviet regional studies, with Donbas located east of Europe's 'most significant dividing line,' according to Samuel Huntington, 'separating the more Catholic western Ukraine from Orthodox eastern Ukraine.' Huntington argues the 'Velvet Curtain' of culture replaced the ideological Iron Curtain (Huntington, 1993/2006, p. 139). This 'Clash of Civilisations' perspective, promoted by Russian ideologues and Western media, is unhelpful to studying the region, ignoring local and regional sensitivities. It is exploited by Russia and its paramilitary proxies, positioning the conflict as a religious stand-off.

In reality, the Orthodox Church has been stronger in west Ukraine than Donbas (Wilson, 1997, p. 91). Even Stalin could not tame the Protestant and Baptist organisations distributing anti-Soviet leaflets in Donbas from 1948-50. 'Industrial workers made up the core of the Baptist groups,' with many war veterans among them (Kuromiya, 1998, p. 318).

This civilisation rivalry focus fails to explain why heavily Russified eastern industrial heartland cities Zaporizhia, Dnipro and Kharkiv were less susceptible to separatist intrigue, despite well-resourced attempts by Russian-supported actors to overturn local governments. We can infer from this that specific factors in Donetsk and Luhansk encouraged secessionist tendencies. The real cleft appears ideological, the very theory Huntington wanted to disprove. Neither Modernist liberal perspectives of Soviet subjugation of nationalism (Gellner, 1997, p. 86) nor the Marxist view that 'fear and coercion,' prevents ethnic and communal tensions turning violent (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 168) adequately explain concerted attempts in 2014 to trigger Donbas secession and their aftermath. Lack of applicability of these theories suggests external involvement, namely from Russia.

Ethnic tensions have been rare since Ukraine's 1991 independence, excepting Russian settlers in Crimea, regularly confronting returning indigenous Crimean Tatars, deported by Stalin during the 1940s (Pohl 2000). Ukrainian ethnicity was never a citizenship requirement, fostering belief that this vast territory could not exist as a unitary state without being peopled by a variety of ethnic groups. It is, therefore, more useful to assess socio-economic, ideological and regional, rather than ethnic cleavages (Nemyria, 1999, pp. 80–83). We have seen, from recent Ukrainian history, these have proved more likely to challenge the state, composed of many regions with separate identities, never previously co-existing in the same country.

Elites and organised crime

There is a history of elites associated with Ukraine's most industrialised, densely populated cities of Donetsk and Luhansk enjoying political weight. After being granted privileged careers in Moscow, Soviet Communist Party Officials from Donbas, including Nikita Khrushchev and Kliment Vorushilov, were able to negotiate higher wages for their home region. This tradition was carried on in post-independence Ukraine by politicians forming the 'Revival of Regions' and 'Regions of Ukraine' groupings to represent elite interests (Sasse, 2002, p. 74), often linked to organised crime.

The Donetsk clan, overseen by Rinat Akhmetov, was Ukraine's most powerful economic grouping at the time of the 2014 revolution. How Akhmetov set out to control the 'wild field' as his personal fiefdom has proved central to the trajectory of Donbas and the geopolitical fortunes of independent Ukraine.

The takeover by these forces first of Donbas and later Ukraine's central administration can be viewed effectively through social science lenses, placing the region's ascendancy in historical context. Economist Albert Hirschman's 'Exit, Voice and Loyalty' options offer citizens or states the choice to show 'loyalty' or patriotism to their organisation if satisfied with leaders; 'exit' their firm, state or national grouping if dissatisfied; or 'voice' grievances to pressurise leaders, should an 'exit' be unavailable (Hirschman, 1970). The Donbas's development as an intentional community can be analysed through three historical eras mirroring these stages, according to a 2004 paper from Vlad Mykhnenko, an Oxford University Professor, originally from Donetsk: the Russian Empire; Bolshevik Rule and Stalin's Great Terror; and post-communist transformation.

The 'exit stage' is associated with one of the most charismatic leaders emerging from Donbas, Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno (1888–1934), who led the peasant Revolutionary Insurgent Army during the 1917–1922 Russian Civil War, fighting a range of local and foreign powers. This idea of feuding rivals has huge relevance today, among the profusion of oligarchs, partisan leaders and criminal bosses attempting to dominate the flammable DNR and LNR quarters.

'Loyalty' is equated by Mykhnenko with brutality, through Stalin's enforced transformation of the volatile Donbas to an industrial, Soviet stronghold in the image of norm-busting local collier Aleksey Stakhanov (1906–1977). After starving millions of peasants to death in 1932–33 (Plokyh, 2915, p. 349) to destroy the deep-rooted folk culture of the Ukrainian countryside, which provided a rival power-structure to the communist authorities, Stalin rounded on Donbas city-dwellers, rooting out 'enemies of the people', including Orthodox church clergy, 'nationalist deviationists,' Trotskyites and 'traitors', executing 30,000 in Stalino *oblast* alone in 1937–38. Donbas accounted for one third of death sentences, but just 16 per cent of Ukraine's population (Kuromiya, 1998, pp. 245–257). This notion of hidden enemies with secret identities is effectively deployed by paramilitary leaders in today's Donbas, claiming their statelets have been infiltrated by an imagined foe of 'Praviy Sektor' nationalist partisans.

These years of prolonged Soviet 'Loyalty', argues Mykhnenko, lasted until the *perestroika* period, initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, when Donbas coalminers showed their 'Voice' in 1989, with a 500,000-strong strike, precipitating Ukrainian independence and establishing emerging civil society. Mykhnenko modifies the Hirschman theory, adding a final 'take-over' stage of Donbas by local elites, associated with then Donetsk governor Viktor Yanukovich. The miners' actions were in response to an 80 per cent drop in real wages, amid worker discontent about an uncaring Moscow, replaced as external power centre by equally ignorant Kyiv.

This use of behavioural science allows us to potentially plot some future trends in Donbas. If anything, Mykhnenko's perceptive analysis underestimated the 1989 'Voice' of Donbas, so overwhelming that an 'exit' from the Soviet Union set the scene for a subsequent 'exit' from Ukraine. Similarly, he perhaps overestimated the economic success of a 'Take-over,' instigated by a corrupt, criminal and greedy administration that would eventually be destroyed by the wrath of its subjects, while some key proponents would play the separatist card to save themselves.

Donbas, contends Kuromiya, has always provided an 'exit' or refuge for 'kulaks' fleeing the countryside after being disenfranchised by Stalin's brutal collectivisation, priests and believers escaping religious persecution, political activists seeking to blend into an anonymous industrial society and criminals escaping justice or dumped there by the state as cheap labour (Kuromiya, 1998, pp. 4, 40, 336). A highly selective view of this patchwork quilt of co-existing identities has seeped into the Ukrainian psyche, focused on a potentially secessionist, violent hinterland, sheltering outlaws, described by Konstantin, a 41-year-old Kyiv taxi driver, whose grandfather worked in Donbas.

...the Soviet administration brought people into Donbas — alcoholics, drug addicts, criminal mafias — who were not needed elsewhere, because there were not enough workers in the mines. They took people out of prisons from cities in Russian territory and sent them to east Ukraine. Fifty years on, that contingent has now integrated into society and the uprising is from the families of those people, who steal, kill and rage against everything (Konstantin, 2016).

The region's gang wars helped shape Ukraine's political and economic models, linking organised crime to the political establishment, argues British academic Taras Kuzio, examining murders which led to integration of criminal and political elites under Donetsk Governor and two-time felon Viktor Yanukovych in the 1990s. Relocating to Kyiv after his Presidential inauguration in 2010, the 'Family' structure built by Yanukovych enabled control of the oligarchs. Kuzio suggests the President owned half the assets of Rinat Akhmetov, confirmed in 1999 by the Ministry of Interior as leader of the *'Lyuksovskа hrupa'* organised crime group. This ensured loyalty of his long-term associate, Ukraine's wealthiest man by the time of the 2014 Euromaidan revolution (Kuzio, 2014, pp. 196–197).

This spectre of organised crime's historic role in Donbas's transition to a market economy continues to haunt today's non-government-controlled territories. Kuzio's central theory is that thuggish and authoritarian behaviour of the Party of Regions set the scene for government-led slaughter of up to 100 anti-Yanukovych protestors in Kyiv in 2014, because its leaders had emerged from a criminal culture and the protest threatened their business interests. 'The Family' of criminal bosses integrated into the political party not only raided corporations, demanding a 50 per cent cut for the President's business associates, but also helped violent separatists stir up the Donetsk region from spring 2014, leading to secession (Kuzio, 2014, pp. 196, 199).

Previous administrations had been more adept in managing Ukraine's regional diversity, with President Kuchma temporarily neutralising Donbas striking miners' demands in 1993. But the equilibrium was a precarious one and Gwendolyn Sasse, a politics professor at Nuffield College, Oxford, warned in 2002 that policy makers must be keenly conscious of their country's existence as a regionalised unitary state (Sasse, 2002, pp. 84–86, 94).

The danger came when ambitious elites started discussing federalisation, now a key Russian demand in the Minsk peace discussions. An anti-federalist consensus previously united Ukraine's national-level elites, who associated federalism with ethno-linguistic cleavages and strengthening of Russian-leaning regions in the country's east, argued Sasse, offering a portent of the difficulties which arrived after the 2014 revolution: 'The ultimate fear is that Ukraine could be pulled apart by centrifugal tendencies in its borderlands in the west, east and south' (Sasse, 2002, p. 82).

Akhmetov eventually made an economic calculation of turning his back on his clan's political champion, Yanukovich, who refused to sign the EU trade agreement, preferring to embrace rival Russian power structures, according to Vadym Karasyov, a political commentator and former Presidential adviser with close ties to the Party of Regions:

The protests are financed by the oligarchs. Today they don't want Putin or the Customs Union and the influence of The Family [of organised crime interests centred around President Yanukovich] scares them. The oligarchs don't really like the EU, but they like Putin even less. The opposition to Yanukovich is the only guarantee of continued rule of the oligarchs, who understand how Putin would impoverish Ukraine (Karasyov, 2013).

Two camps: grassroots conflict versus 'artificial separatism'

Recent Donbas conflict and secession-specific research comprises two broad camps. The first paints genuine separatist movements reacting to 'Euromaidan' events of 2013-2014, forming locally-supported independent statelets, sparking 'civil war.' In the second, advocates of 'artificial separatism' claim interests of domestic elites and foreign players, rather than autonomous ambitions of the region's residents, propelled events and that self-styled republics cannot survive without foreign power support.

In the first grouping, Ivan Katchanovski argues proclamation of DNR and LNR statelets resulted from spontaneous expressions of separatism reacting to violent overthrow of Ukraine's pro-Russian leaders, initiated by 'radical nationalist and neo-Nazi organisations and football ultras, which formed the Right Sector Alliance' (Katchanovski, 2014, p. 8). While admitting 'volunteers and mercenaries came to Donbas from Russia,' including Russian nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russian Cossacks, Chechens, Ingush and Osetians — forming armed groups such as that led by Igor Girkin (also known as 'Strelkov'), which grabbed Donetsk oblast towns Kramatorsk and Sloviansk — he claims evidence linking the conflict to direct Russian military intervention was 'misrepresented or even fabricated'.

Despite Russia training and arming fighters, masterminding political appointments at the helms of the 'republics', Katchanovski believes the conflict mirrors typical 'civil war.' His survey, carried out by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) at the end of April to the beginning of May 2014, shows 54 per cent of Donbas residents backed 'separatism', compared to marginal support in bordering regions, although this includes greater autonomy and federalism in addition to outright secession. While many citizens seek devolution from Kyiv, few demanded a separate or Russian-controlled state. Just 8 per cent backed regional independence. Even ethnic Russians, representing nearly half of Donetsk and Luhansk residents, were evenly split between supporting the unitary Ukrainian state and 'different separatist options' such as joining Russia (18 per cent) (Katchanovski, 2014, p. 16).

Papers presented by fellow Canadian academics in Ottawa in December 2014 claimed the 'murderous and violent' Kyiv revolution was rooted in west Ukrainian nationalist ideology and religious fervour, backed by North American Ukrainian diaspora. Donbas logically rebelled against Euromaidan's nationalist, anti-Russian rhetoric, argued Helena Mokrushyna, its residents taking to the streets in Spring 2014 because their demands for Russian as an official second language and close political alliance with Russia had been long ignored. She labels the Donetsk insurgency a 'grassroots movement' leading to proclamation of the DNR, 'an attempt at a new political and social project which reflect the ideas and aspirations of a great part of Donetsk region residents' (Mokrushyna, 2014).

These suppositions should be questioned. While many west Ukrainians travelled to demonstrate in Kyiv, a large proportion of those killed by snipers came from Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Donbas, throwing cold water on Ostriichuk's theory of a west Ukrainian plot to overthrow an eastern President. Similarly, the presence of a handful of black and red OUN flags does not prove the radical Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists was running the show. The protestors I met on Kyiv's streets in November and December 2013, included visitors from Sumy, Luhansk and Rivne, plus many locals. While Diasporas typically play a role in uprisings, her notion that the revolution would not have happened without support of expatriate Ukrainians in North America is wishful thinking. The financial support of oligarchs turning their backs on Yanukovich appears more crucial.

Valid points about differences of Ukrainian identity in Donbas compared to other regions are made by Mokrushyna, but Euromaidan's dominant rhetoric was pro-European, pro-democratic and thus anti-Putin, not nationalist and anti-Russian as she claims. Moreover, Yanukovich's favouring of Russian as a second state language and his closeness to the Russian authorities belie one of the central planks of her research. Her idea of the DNR as a genuine social experiment, fuelled by grassroots insurgency does not stand up to scrutiny, with only tiny numbers on the streets to support separatism in spring 2014, compared to far larger pro-Ukrainian demonstrations in Donbas, according to eyewitness accounts (Ryabchin, 2016; Biletskiy, 2016; Sereda, 2016; Chaban, 2016).

Another academic in this camp, Serhiy Kudelia, political science professor at Baylor University in Texas, argues Donbas self-defence units appeared in late February 2014, well before Russian schooled-leaders arrived, with insurgency taking hold only in towns with fewer than 20 per cent Ukrainian speakers (Kudelia, 2014, p. 1). Transformed by ten years' protective rule by Yanukovich's Donetsk clan, residents felt 'resentment-based emotions' triggered by abrupt regime change, accompanied by disintegration of the Party of Regions, coupled with revocation of a law giving Russian language parity with Ukrainian. Without internal drivers, external meddling would

not have led to armed revolts and separatist-controlled enclaves, claims Kudelia. His analysis deserves consideration because the defecting elites which he says helped fuel the insurgency, are involved in today's secessionist administrations. Unlike other scholars, he uses ethno-linguistic factors in his analysis, showing Donbas towns with more than 80 per cent of native Ukrainian speakers stayed under government control, explaining patchy support for separatism.

The rival school of research maintains events in Donbas could not have occurred without political leadership or organisation. As the Party of Regions — a highly organised structure across Donbas — was disintegrating and not involved in setting up rebel 'republics,' for Andreas Umland and fellow researcher Anton Shekhovtsov, only Moscow's politicians had the political clout, abilities and resources to orchestrate full-scale secessionist rebellion.

The leaked 'Glazyev Tapes' of March 2014 show Putin's key adviser Sergey Glazyev coordinating separatist demonstrations in southeast Ukrainian cities 'to create the conditions for the puppet state of Novorossia,' (Umland, 2016). The tapes confirm a Russian-initiated conflict, despite most academics' emphasis on Ukraine's cultural-regional differences between Russophone regions and the centre and west of the country. Russia's leadership, from February 2014 onwards, aimed to annex Crimea, stir up unrest in southern and eastern Ukrainian provinces and encourage them to secede and create a *Novorossiia* (New Russia) state. Russia's training of Donetsk secessionists from 2006, through the Eurasian Youth Union, suggests the rebellion was not a genuine local phenomenon (Umland & Shekhovtsov, 2015).

But there were other parties involved. In the 2014 Spring it was 'remarkable how well and suddenly the most Soviet-nostalgic sections of the Donbas's society managed to seemingly self-organize a large anti-governmental protest without much (official) help from the dominant regional Donetsk clan' (Umland, 2016). Umland suggests Russian authorities were therefore complicit, but neglects the crucial role of post-Komsomol youth wing networks, financed by central government even during the Ukrainisation project of President of Victor Yushchenko. These employ teams of 'cultural workers', generally trained singers and actors, to teach Soviet history to local children and organise subsidised holidays and trips to seaside resorts. Their work promotes an alternative, regional, Soviet-based identity, described by Carlene, an astonished 36-year-old Caribbean visitor to Luhansk *oblast* during 2009:

My friends took me to a commemoration of the Russian Revolution in the Palace of Culture. There was a Ukrainian flag above the stage, but everything else was Soviet. The children of all the town's schools had been frogmarched here to learn about their history. This took place in a series

of old songs and re-enactments. The Mayor and all the local big-wigs were there, greeting out-of-towners like me with badges of Lenin and the hammer and sickle... He talked about the Soviet Union ending and how he regretted it. Most of the older people in that room were linked by nostalgia for their Soviet past. There were a few tears. I am from Trinidad and Tobago and I remember the coup we had in 1991, where 118 Muslim extremists took over the parliament, TV station and held our islands to ransom. Here is a big local meeting of ex-communists in Ukraine with half the town there, all well-organised. If they want to run something, I don't think you can mess with them (De Bourg, 2017).

These centres and their workers played a part in the secession, are still functioning today and act as a glue, holding the LNR together. But as Umland points out, local politicians and dignitaries who attended their events fled — siding with Ukrainian authorities when the conflict began — replaced by ultra-nationalist Russian citizens, who led the putative uprisings. 'As political leadership and resources were provided by Moscow, an involvement of regional notabilities was not necessary for the rebellion to happen' (Umland, 2016).

The 'Surkov Leaks' of emails from Putin's adviser on policies to Ukraine and Northern Georgian statelets, Vladislav Surkov, confirm Russia's use of proxy groups to initiate and manipulate the conflict. Orysia Lutsevych, manager of the Ukraine Forum at Chatham House, places this initiative within broader strategy of boosting *Russkiy Mir*, the Russian World, a fluid geographical and ideological, conservative cocktail aimed at counterbalancing Western liberal values. Offering a pan-Slavic regional identity with Russia at the hub of Eurasian civilisation, the concept combines religious and economic components, using the Orthodox Church and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) — launched in 2015 as an alternative regional bloc to the EU, promising members lower gas prices — as unifying forces.

Based on exploiting ethno-linguistic ties between Russian speaking communities, its promoters cite 18th century German philosopher John Gottfried Herder, linking thought process to language: 'If a pro-Russian way of thinking is to be nurtured abroad, it is crucial to invest in the reinforcement of the Russian language' (Lutsevych, 2016, p. 14).

A network of Russian state-sponsored organisations in Ukraine promoted federalisation and campaigned against EU integration prior to the 2013 EU Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, claiming it would cost Ukraine \$10bn. Even before this summit, Putin plotted separatist uprisings to prevent Ukraine signing the EU association agreement threatening to annex east Ukrainian regions. The rebellion's instigators worked with Russian Special Forces. Igor Girkin ('Strelkov'), who played a similar role in the 1992 Transdnistrian secession war, had only recently resigned as a Russian in-

telligence officer. Russia's proxy groups, including the International Eurasian Movement led by Alexander Dugin — sanctioned by the US Treasury for his role in the east Ukraine conflict in March 2015 (Lutsevych, 2016, pp. 23–29) — supplied troops to fight in Donbas and recruited mercenaries, described as 'liberators of Orthodox brothers from fascists.'

This Moscow-sourced separatist project was 'launched by Kremlin-affiliated groups and supported by Russian special security forces' in order 'to destabilize the country and exert leverage over its future development' (Lutsevych, 2016, p. 33). By showing how deeply involved the Russian state was in the overthrow of the Donbas administrations, the literature from Umland and Lutsevych suggests Moscow-led forces are also involved in day-to-day running of the 'republics.'

Lessons from frozen conflicts

Despite commentators, soldiers and civilians describing Russian occupation of Donbas, and a politically correct mantra among Ukrainian officials of 'temporarily occupied territories,' this is not a classic occupation like the Soviet takeover of Afghanistan in 1979, where occupying powers openly set up governing bodies. Although my research points to Moscow's clear control of power structures in the two enclaves, this is clandestine, rendering readings on classic occupations irrelevant to this project. Donbas is unique in many ways. Its conflict is still 'hot', with varying intensity. Despite negligible international media coverage, fighters and civilians on both sides of the dividing line are killed weekly or daily. The nature of the conflict, part trench warfare, in similar primitive conditions to WWII, conducted in a bleak, inhospitable steppe landscape unchanged since the 1930s, and part high-tech social media and internet propaganda, combined with partisan urban street-fighting in its early stages, takes Donbas into a new dominion of international relations.

Donbas is often mistaken by scholars for a 'frozen conflict' resembling nearby Transdnistria and Crimea, which have seceded to some extent from post-Soviet states of Moldova and Ukraine respectively. Both these territories host large numbers of foreign troops, are not recognised internationally and have no current fighting, which is why their conflicts are classified 'frozen'. Some factors affecting these territories are however relevant to eastern Ukraine, which can learn from Moldova's story.

The Transdnistrian secessionists of 1991 were also steered by 'unreformed communist' leaders imported from other parts of the former Soviet Union. They succeeded not due to local support, but through transferring 70,000 soldiers from the Russian 14th army to back local paramilitaries. Offering another portent for Donbas, elite-led industrial production has been surpassed by post-secession smuggling and organised crime (Roper, 2002, pp. 107–111). Both Ukraine and Moldova were riven by centre-periph-

ery elite rivalry. Russophone locals in Transdnistria feared Chisinau's overtures to Bucharest could lead to unification with Romania (Hughes & Sasse, 2002, pp. 26–27). This lent the Moldovan conflict an ethnic and cultural dimension totally absent from Ukraine.

The political economy of secession

Popularly-held secession scenarios are generally not what they seem, according to a research paper from the World Bank's Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler of Oxford University's Centre for the Study of African Economics. While the global public accepts romantic notions of secession, relayed by 'Holywood and diasporas' to populations in developing countries, the discourse of secessionists claiming 'long-established identities are denied rights of self-determination by quasi-imperial authorities' should not be taken at face value. Secessionist identities are generally invented or imagined, argues their research — with extreme players in identity politics often not genuine members of groups they represent — serving the purposes of an elite wishing to boost their financial status by reducing taxes paid to central authorities. Typically, movements gather pace in regions abundant in natural resources, with rebel organisations regarding primary commodity exports as steady finance sources. Low regional incomes make it easier to recruit rebel troops, while weakening government capacity to oppose insurgents (Collier & Hoeffler, 2002, pp. 1–9). All these factors are present in the Donbas insurgency.

This literature overview offers lenses from geography, conflict studies, geopolitics and social and political sciences for studying Donbas and its control by rebel and Russian paramilitary groups. The study of elites, which prompted the secessions and remain involved in running both Ukrainian and breakaway territory, is also important, as is the partly criminal and violent historical culture of these enclaves. Yet there is a literature deficit describing the life and motivations of ordinary Ukrainians. Collier & Hoeffler give the best rationale for first-hand study of post-secession Donbas, rather than just using library research to deduce conclusions:

Objectives and motivations, especially when they are an amorphous mix of romanticism and self-interest, are better revealed by behaviour than by study of the political discourse utilized, which includes both propaganda and self-delusion (Collier & Hoeffler, 2002, p. 15).

Tales from a wartime economy

It's tough to live in Donetsk, but people who remain there under occupation, have no other choice and they adjust to life in the 'republic', a terrorist creation. They get used to the curfew, they rejoice when there is no shooting, when they have food and heating and when none of their friends have been kidnapped by the authorities (Chaban, 2016).

As both entrepreneur and supporter of an independent Ukraine grounded in European values, Donetsk-born Bohdan Chaban could not accept the authoritarian restrictions of what he considered an illegitimate 'republic.' Chaban detested the concept of the Soviet-styled DNR so much that he first organised mass pro-Ukrainian protests before creating an armed partisan resistance to help destroy the DNR's infrastructure

It is this combination of patriotic identity plus belief and encouragement in individual economic activity — qualities possessed by Chaban and colleagues who eventually left Donetsk — which the DNR and LNR require to form viable statelets. But while a minority of citizens strive to create businesses, it is difficult for them to do this legitimately. Economic inertia, coupled with general absence of loyalty to the newly-created entities — which lack any real identity, history of independence or self-rule — complicates the relationship of individuals to self-styled statelets and casts doubt on their long-term autonomy and sustainability.

Chaban now runs a popular café and cultural centre in the heart of Mariupol's port city. Yet many Mariupol residents like 54-year-old taxi driver Genya, who previously relied on ferrying business people to Donetsk, have adjusted their activities, with previous routes and supply chains now under enemy occupation. Today Genya transports war correspondents and international aid representatives to the nearby conflict zone.

The divisions here are real and potentially life threatening, with many sporting military uniform and carrying weapons, leading to distrust and mutual suspicion among members of society. Insults such as '*Pravi seky*' relating to alleged membership of extreme Ukrainian nationalist '*Praviy Sektor*' militias or '*seperatiuhy*', slang for separatists, are regularly bandied about, with nobody really knowing who is who and a sense of fluidity between different groups, typical of wartime environments.

These societal divisions are no surprise in Mariupol, parts of which were occupied by DNR militias, accompanied in May 2014, many say, by Russian troops. These militias engaged in street-by-street battles with pro-Ukrainian forces. The impetus to keep this strategic city inside Ukraine came from Serhiy Taruta, Akhmetov's former business partner. The oligarch-turned politician describes how he mobilised volunteers, co-ordinated by engineers to erect barriers to defend Mariupol from 'Russian Special Forces, a big tank brigade and Russian weapons and military systems' (Taruta, 2017). This initiative was combined with a 'psychological' project, to convince the city's residents they would be better off under Ukrainian than separatist rule (Stepanenko, 2017).

Genya talks bitterly of how 30 separatists were holed up in the Dom Profspilok trade union HQ on the central Prospekt Akhimova, protected by local pensioners. They then attacked the local police station, killing nine officers. He lays the blame for destroying a once flourishing regional econ-

omy firmly with the separatists. Like many locals, previously sympathetic to Putin's *Russkiy Mir* vision, he now examines all packaging, refusing to buy or consume food manufactured in Russia. The conflict, particularly murders by Russian forces on his doorstep, has solidified his once transient Ukrainian identity (Genya, 2016).

On the other side of the Conflict Line, the Russian controlled territories also struggle with local identities. When the MH17 Malaysian Airlines plane was shot down by a Russian-made Buk missile system within the boundaries of the DNR in July 2014, nearby villagers 'were either speaking Ukrainian or a *Surzhik* mix of Ukrainian and Russian.' With many of the region's senior citizens collecting *Hryvnia* pensions from nearby cities under Ukrainian government control, the DNR authorities' enforced use of roubles is failing. 'They are trying to stamp on the mentality of the people that they are now living in a different country,' reports a western journalist in Ukraine. But their push to stock shops with Russian or locally-made food-stuffs has backfired, as locals prefer the taste and ingredients of Ukrainian-made goods (Western Journalist, 2016). The Kremlin narrative of an oppressed, Russian-speaking minority sheltering in its own state is simply not credible.

Most Donbas inhabitants expect their children to leave for Russia or other parts of Ukraine to increase earnings. Russia is the preferred diaspora destination because wages are higher. A larger proportion (70 per cent) of the displaced Ukrainian diaspora in Russia finds full time employment, compared to 46 per cent in Ukraine, according to a detailed survey by social scientist Gwendolyn Sasse. Those in Russia earn a mean monthly income of \$500, compared to \$170 in Ukraine. This shifting economic status has a major effect on displaced people's identities and the families they support.

Two thirds of the one million displaced in Russia perceive the DNR and LNR as belonging to Russia, whereas 96 per cent of the 1.8 million refugees in other parts of Ukraine see the territories as an integral part of that country. 'About half of the displaced in Russia and Ukraine are in daily or weekly contact with relatives or friends in the occupied territories,' writes Sasse, even though those in Russia retain strong dual Russian and Ukrainian 'mixed identities' (Sasse, 2017, pp. 1–7).

The likes of Vera, whose children and grandchildren left the LNR for economic reasons, experience constantly shifting identities during the conflict, at various times expressing affinity with Ukraine, Russia and *Novorossiya*. Above these rival national identities looms an overarching Soviet nostalgia. These older Soviet-identifying Donbas residents feel let down politically by a weak Ukrainian leadership, failing to keep the country together, and economically by Russia's Vladimir Putin's renegeing on promises to carve a contiguous, economically viable *Novorissiya* state out of east Ukraine. This concept was pushed by Russian ideologues on state TV to lo-

cal activists like Vera, an organiser of mass meetings in Luhansk, leveraging her Communist-era networks:

We wanted our own identity, separate from Moscow and Kyiv, like we always had in Donbas and now Novorossiya was capturing the popular imagination, with talk about how Donetsk and the LNR would be merging two years down the line. We expected Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv and Odessa to join us, but they weren't allowed too. Now there is no longer talk of Novorossiya and we are neither in Ukraine nor in Russia, but out on our own, with mines and factories all shut down (Vera (N), 2016).

Identity issues to the fore

The concept of distinct Ukrainian national identity first took shape in eastern Ukraine (Szporluk, 1997, p. 89), the very region the Kremlin claims is historically Russian. Grounded in the myth of freedom-loving Zaporozhian Cossacks, this identity was later appropriated by western Ukraine. The two traditions are very different, the former a response to repressive Russian imperialism, the latter to Polish domination (Sasse, 2002, p. 72). Despite political commitment to nation-building after a majority vote of all Ukrainian regions to leave the USSR in 1991, the prevalence of multiple identities muddled a clear direction. 'Some of these people are Soviet in the morning, Russian in the afternoon and Ukrainian in the evening — the order may change' (Szporluk, 1998, p. 317).

This issue became apparent at the start of the 20th century when both Ukrainian nationalists and Bolshevik revolutionaries failed to understand why they made so little headway in capturing popular support in Donbas, where 'people identified themselves with a multitude of actual and imagined communities,' including the Cossack-inspired mythical free steppe, or 'wild field', 'which in turn, constituted their moral universe' (Kuromiya, 1998, pp. 64–65).

This multiple identity is exemplified by Zhenya, a 44-year-old builder from Alchevsk in the breakaway Luhansk region, son of fervent separatists, whose own sympathies, like his sister's, remain pro-Ukrainian, reflecting inter-generational divergence. He describes his 2015 holiday in occupied Crimea:

Ukraine was playing football on TV, so my friends from Luhansk and I settled down in the hotel bar to watch the match, but the Krymchany (Crimean locals) changed the channel. We are Ukrainians and even though we nominally support the LNR government, we still want to support our football team as they represent us and our nationality. The Krymchany don't understand this as many of them are ethnic Russians. We turned the TV back to the sports channel and started to watch the match but the locals started calling us names such as 'fashisty', until a full-scale 'draka' (punch-up) broke out and things got really unpleasant. The lady running the hotel tried to stop the fighting as she was

worried about her furniture getting smashed up, only she slipped and broke her arm. Everyone tried to help her and started apologising to each other about how silly they had all been, saying: 'We are one people!' But in our hearts, we know that we are not. (Zhenya (N), 2016)

While a regional sense of belonging had grown and strengthened since Ukraine's independence, with nearly 70 per cent of Donetsk respondents self-identifying with their own region above all else (Hrytsak, 2007, p. 49), and Ukrainian identity solidifying in government controlled territory, after Russia's illegal 2014 Crimean annexation and the subsequent eastern conflict, Szporluk's description still applies to the Donbas, nearly 20 years later.

Conclusion

Until the Donbas identity is transformed to a more permanent identity aligned to the Ukrainian state, regional secessionist support is likely to continue. The government must prioritise winning over eastern citizens, not through commemorating divisive nationalist 'heroes' and the politics of language, but through identifying unifying historical figures appealing to everybody in Ukraine. Sasse throws out strong words of caution to the Ukrainian state when considering future policies to the Donbas territories, particularly regarding the nature of changing identities:

If even those who have experienced something as extreme as displacement convey mixed identities, these identities are even more likely to characterize the population of Eastern Ukraine at large. Ukrainian politicians have to keep this reality in mind if they want to reconsolidate the Ukrainian state from within (Sasse, 2017, p. 18).

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