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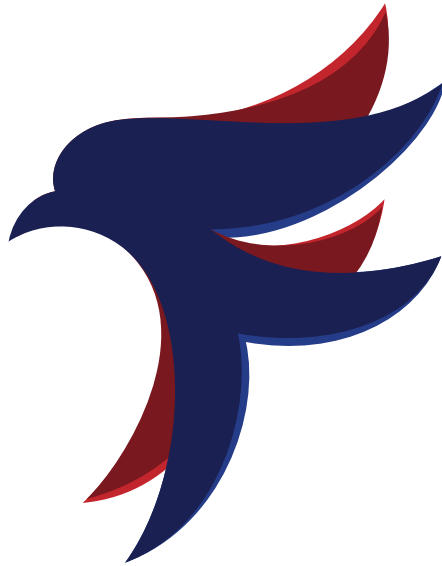


BLACK SEA STRATEGY PAPERS

FIVE YEARS OF WAR IN THE DONBAS

ROBERT E. HAMILTON





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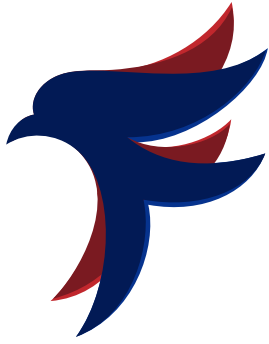
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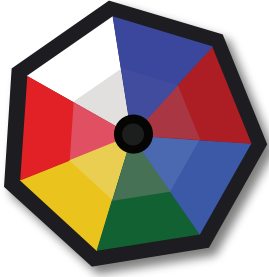
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FIVE YEARS OF WAR IN THE DONBAS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The war in the eastern Ukrainian region known as the Donbas has killed over 13,000 people, displaced millions, and led to the worst rupture in relations between the Russian Federation and the West since the end of the Cold War. The war was caused by inherent cleavages in Ukrainian society, combined with clumsy and self-interested intervention by outside powers. The war's effects on Ukraine have been profound: the collapse of the post-Soviet Ukrainian political elite; billions of dollars in direct and indirect losses to the Ukrainian economy; a wholesale restructuring of the Ukrainian armed forces; social dislocation and psychological trauma; and unprecedented environmental damage.

Despite these sad legacies, there are reasons to be optimistic that a settlement to the conflict is in view. The exhaustion and frustration of people in the separatist-controlled regions, Russia's changing policy on the war—at least in part a result of rising frustration among the Russian public—and the election of a new Ukrainian government without regional ties or ties to networks of oligarchs all contribute to the possibility of peace. But in order for peace to endure after the war, the Ukrainian state must construct a broad-based, civic national identity, and it must tackle the country's endemic corruption.

The international community must be engaged in both crafting a settlement to the war and helping Ukraine deal with its consequences. External observers may be inclined to point to social division and corruption as the internal causes of the war, and argue that Ukraine has to fix itself before the outside world can intervene to help. And this is true as far as it goes. But it is also true that the outside world contributed to the start of war in Ukraine by making the country the object in a geopolitical tussle between Russia and the West. Any honest accounting of the war's history must acknowledge this fact. And any fair treatment of Ukraine after the war should seek to compensate it through significant, long-term assistance.

THE “ACCIDENTAL WAR”

Despite the fact that the war in eastern Ukraine has killed over 13,000 people and displaced millions, it has been called the “accidental war.”¹ In contrast to the operation in Crimea, which was planned and directed by the Kremlin and was seen in the Russian Federation as righting a historical injustice, the war in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine unfolded slowly and haphazardly. The slide to war resulted from a nonchalant attitude toward grievances—which had previously erupted but always subsided—in the Donbas; chaos in Kyiv that froze decision-making; over-exuberant local actors with support from Kremlin-linked “curators;” and tacit approval from the Kremlin itself.

The structural causes of the war revolve around cleavages in Ukrainian society, which no post-Soviet Ukrainian government tried very hard to heal. These cleavages involve ethnicity and language, but not exclusively. Diverging views of Ukraine’s history and its future vector of international integration and diverging social and economic structures aligned with the linguistic divide to produce a powerful cleavage in identities between the Donbas and the rest of Ukraine. This cleavage proved to be the “master cleavage” that defined the conflict. Finally, any examination of the causes of the war cannot neglect the role of outside actors, principally Russia. By treating Ukraine as an object of geopolitical competition rather than an actor in its own right, outside actors contributed to the outbreak of the war.

Despite its “accidental” nature, the war has had far-reaching effects on Ukraine. It has resulted in the collapse of the Ukrainian political elite and ushered in a government unprecedented in Ukraine’s post-Soviet history. It has caused up to \$10 billion in direct losses to Ukraine, and probably more than that in interruption of trade and investment in the country.² The war has caused a fundamental restructuring of the Ukrainian armed forces, which on the eve of war



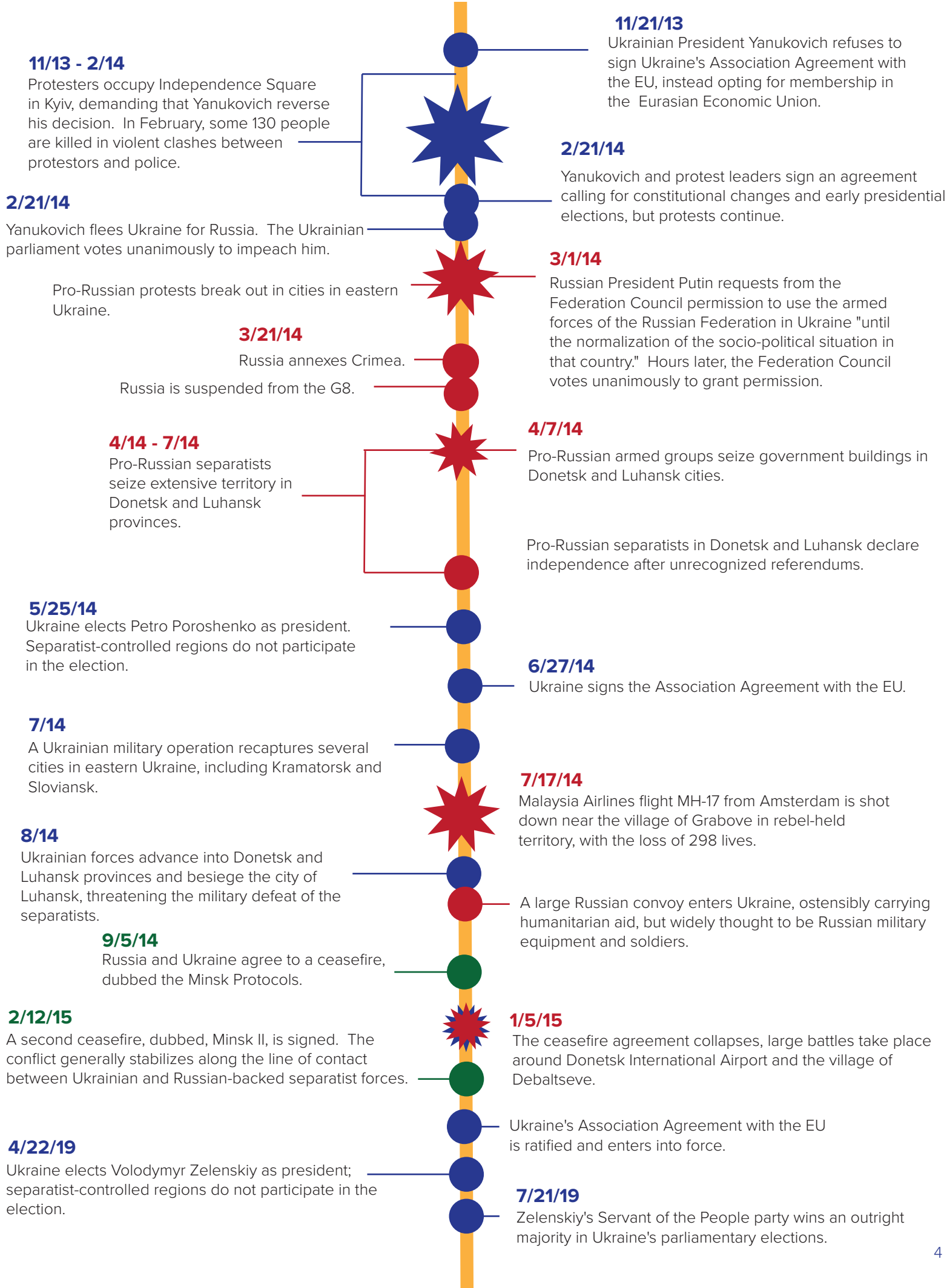
A memorial made up of exploded munitions in Avdiivka, Donetsk region, eastern Ukraine, 24 October 2016. (OSCE/ Evgeniy Maloletka)

were almost completely incapable of fulfilling their functions. It has caused unprecedented disruption to Ukrainian society and psychological damage to its people, especially those living in the conflict zone. And it has caused environmental damage that will take decades and billions of dollars to reverse.

The war is currently at an inflection point that allows for cautious optimism. The exhaustion and frustration of ordinary people in the Donbas, scaled-back Russian goals for the war, at least in part due to declining public support for it, and a new administration in Kyiv provide an opportunity for fresh thinking about how to end this “accidental” war. Even if the war ends, Ukraine faces two significant challenges: (1) progress in fighting corruption and (2) the creation of a broad-based, civic national identity with room for Russian-speakers. Unless it deals with these two issues, Ukraine will forever be vulnerable to the type of conflict it is currently experiencing.

¹ Denys Kiryukhin and Svitlana Shcherbak, interview with the author, May 14, 2019.

² Anders Aslund, “Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag,” Atlantic Council, March 2018, p. 9.



CAUSES OF THE WAR: WHAT ARE THEY FIGHTING ABOUT?

In any war, one of the most fundamental questions is, “What are they fighting about?” because successfully ending a conflict requires understanding what started it. The war in the Donbas is often described as a conflict between ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians, or as a war over language, between Ukrainian-speakers and Russian-speakers. While ethnic identity and language play a role in the conflict, they do not alone determine loyalties and therefore are not its cause. Instead, ethnic and linguistic identities interact with other identities to form the war’s dividing lines. These other identities can be grouped into two general categories: (1) identities related to interpretation of Ukraine’s history and its future geopolitical affiliation and (2) identities related to social and economic structure.

So the war in the Donbas is about identities, but not only ethno-linguistic identities. Instead, it is about three “sets” of identities—ethno-linguistic, historical-geopolitical, and socio-economic—which interact with each other to form the dividing lines of the conflict. Among these sets of identities, the ethno-linguistic one is the least accurate in predicting loyalties, further undermining the idea that Ukraine is experiencing an “ethnic conflict.” Historical-geopolitical and socio-economic identities tend to align with each other, and to predict loyalties in the conflict more accurately. As historian Serhey Yekelchyk has noted, the conflict is “a clash of different political models and concepts of citizenship masquerading as ethnic strife.”³

Ethno-Linguistic Identities

Ukraine’s ethno-linguistic balance has been the subject of much analysis. While surveys

and census data paint a picture of a clean breakdown between Ukraine’s two major ethnic groups, the truth about how ethnicity and language relate to each other, and how both relate to loyalties, is more complex. In the 2001 census, the last one taken prior to the outbreak of the war, 77.8% of respondents identified as Ukrainian and 17.3% identified as Russian.⁴ But ethnic self-identification in Ukraine does not necessarily correlate with the primary language spoken. For example, in the 2001 census, 14.8% of those who identified as Ukrainians said their native language was Russian.⁵ A 2006-2007 survey by the Razumkov Center showed that 52% of Ukrainians considered Ukrainian to be their native language, while 25.7% considered it Russian.⁶

In other words, a non-trivial number of those who self-identify as Ukrainian consider Russian their native language. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in Donetsk and Luhansk, the two provinces that comprise the Donbas. In the 2001 census, the share of ethnic Ukrainians in these two provinces was 58% in Donetsk and 56.9% in Luhansk, but the shares claiming Ukrainian as their native language were only 30% and 24.1%, respectively.⁷ This divide between ethnic and linguistic identities has led to the emergence of the label “Russian-speakers” to describe those who may identify as either Ukrainian or Russian, but for whom the primary language is Russian.

But even the label “Russian-speakers” is not always helpful in determining loyalties. The eastern Ukrainian city of Toretsk, which was controlled by separatists for several months in spring and summer 2014, is a good example. In Toretsk, the majority of the population speaks Ukrainian, but the city largely supported the

³ Serhey Yekelchyk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. xv.

⁴ Yekelchyk, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 14.

⁵ Yekelchyk, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 17.

⁶ Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa, eds. *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives* (Bristol, England: E-International Relations Publishing, 2016), p. 9.

⁷ Yekelchyk, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 21.



separatist movement at the beginning of the conflict.⁸ And as Serhey Yekelchik notes, “Kyiv residents remain mostly Russophone, for example, but they vote overwhelmingly for pro-Ukrainian parties. Soldiers and volunteers on the Ukrainian side (of the war) speak mostly Russian, just as their opponents do.”⁹

So ethnic self-identification is not a reliable predictor of language spoken, and neither ethnicity nor language is a reliable predictor of loyalties in the conflict. This is in part due to the fact that most censuses and surveys ask people to neatly “bin” themselves into a single identity, when in fact people’s identities are often multiple and malleable. When given a choice, people often express this flexibility: in a 1997 nationwide survey, 27% of Ukrainian citizens selected “both Ukrainian and Russian” when asked to list their ethnicity.¹⁰ By 2017, largely a result of the polarization of identities brought on by the war, the number of Ukrainians who felt they belonged to more than one ethnic group had fallen to 12%, with an additional 6% saying they belonged to no ethnic group.¹¹

Historical-Geopolitical Identities

In the Donbas, there long has been an attachment to a “Soviet” identity that has no clear relationship to ethnicity or language, and in western Ukraine, an attachment to a “European” identity has long been prevalent. These identities—which frame how Ukrainians see their own history and determine their preferences for their country’s future geopolitical affiliation—are more important predictors of loyalty than ethnicity or language. Especially important is how the two sides see the legacy of the Soviet Union on Ukraine’s development.

In western Ukraine, the Soviet experience is largely seen as a violent interruption of Ukraine’s natural process of developing into a European state. Western Ukraine has its own heroes and its own national mythology, and was not fully integrated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic until 1956. Ukrainian political scientist Mikhail Pogrebinsky argues that the geopolitical identity of western Ukraine is rooted in the Ukrainian language; a hatred for the “colonial” past imposed on Ukraine by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union; memory of the

⁸ Denys Yurchenko, Captain, Ukrainian Army. Interview with the author, May 21, 2019.

⁹ Yekelchik, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 119.

¹⁰ Yekelchik, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 17.

¹¹ “More than 90% of citizens consider themselves ethnic Ukrainians – survey results,” Ukraine Crisis Media Center, April 15, 2017, internet resource at: <https://www.uacrisis.org/55302-ukraine-identity>, accessed October 11, 2019.



When, at the last minute, Yanukovich declined to sign the agreement, instead opting for membership in the Russia-centered Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and a line of credit from Russia, angry protestors, many of whom came from western Ukraine, took to the streets in Kyiv. The protests were motivated not only by Ukraine's apparent lurch away from the West and toward Russia, but also by popular anger at Yanukovich's corrupt, authoritarian regime.

1932-1933 Holodomor (famine) as genocide of the Ukrainians; and reverence for nationalist guerrillas and “heroes of the nation” like Stepan Bandera, the nationalist leader imprisoned by Nazi Germany and later released to fight against Soviet forces in the waning days of World War II.¹²

In eastern Ukraine, and especially in the Donbas, the Soviet experience is remembered as the period when Ukraine played a key role in saving the world from German fascism, and when the Donbas played a key role in the Soviet industrial economy. In the Soviet period, workers in the Donbas were known for their embrace of “Stakhanovism,” a doctrine that glorified the role of “shock workers” and the over-fulfillment of state production plans.¹³ And Soviet propaganda returned the favor, lionizing Donbas coal miners as “model workers, shouldering their patriotic duty to provide the country with fuel.”¹⁴ Eastern Ukraine was also a center of the Soviet Communist Party: Leonid Brezhnev was born there, and Nikita Khrushchev made his career there.¹⁵

These two radically different interpretations of the Soviet experience laid the foundation for conflict, but did not make it inevitable. Reporter and author Tim Judah has described the relationship between history and conflict by noting that although the war in Ukraine is not just about history, it could not be fought without “weaponizing” history.¹⁶ Political scientist Denys Koryukhin neatly captures how this “weaponized” history affected Ukrainians’ relationship to their past: “If in the first case Ukraine used to appear as a breakaway part of Russia, then in the second it was an Eastern European country enslaved by Russia.”¹⁷

The two sides disagree not only about Ukraine’s history, but also its future path of development and geopolitical affiliation. While one side argues that Ukraine’s future lies in Europe and argues for political and economic development

along Western lines, the other believes Ukraine should remain closely tied to Russia, with the requisite implications on its political and economic systems. Serhey Yekelchuk argues that the conflict is largely one “between the new Western-style civil society and the strong paternalistic state.”¹⁸ This disagreement came to a head in late 2013 in the dispute over whether the Viktor Yanukovich government would sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. When, at the last minute, Yanukovich declined to sign the agreement, instead opting for membership in the Russia-centered Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and a line of credit from Russia, angry protestors, many of whom came from western Ukraine, took to the streets in Kyiv. The protests were motivated not only by Ukraine’s apparent lurch away from the West and toward Russia, but also by popular anger at Yanukovich’s corrupt, authoritarian regime.

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After the fall of the Yanukovich regime, the new government did another about-face and expressed its desire for complete and rapid integration with the West, including membership in the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It expressed the intent to develop a Western-style civil society, with the homogenization of language and culture around traditional Ukrainian themes one of its key elements. This new orientation left little room for the separate identity that had developed in the Donbas, which felt left out of the symbolic

¹² Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 88.

¹³ Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 116.

¹⁵ Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 10.

¹⁶ Judah, *In Wartime: Stories From Ukraine* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), p. 3.

¹⁷ Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 62.

¹⁸ Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 18.



Pro-Russian demonstration in Donetsk, March 2014. (Source: Andrew Butko)

representation of the new Ukraine.¹⁹ The perception that one region of Ukraine had prevailed over the other²⁰ catalyzed protests in the Donbas against Ukraine's new geopolitical trajectory. Known as the "Russian spring," these protests demanded a halt to Ukraine's Westward movement and regional autonomy for the Donbas. One local "Russian spring" activist said that at this time people in eastern Ukraine didn't want to join Russia; they just disagreed with events in Kyiv. He remarked that people in the Donbas "had never been to Kyiv before and didn't want it to come to them."²¹

Social-Economic Identities

Overlaid on the divisions in ethno-linguistic and historical-geopolitical identities is a division in social and economic structures between the Donbas and the rest of Ukraine. The Donbas was unique within Ukraine in the extent to which its economy was based on Soviet-era heavy industry and mining, and this unique economic structure contributed to a social structure different from that in the rest of Ukraine. The post-Soviet economic collapse hit Ukraine hard, but nowhere harder than the Donbas, whose

economy was poorly positioned to compete in the global economic system Ukraine suddenly found itself a part of. Ukraine's post-Soviet economic slump exacerbated an existing perception of unfair economic burden-sharing, with each part of the country arguing that the other was taking more than it was contributing.

The Soviet decision to make the Donbas the centerpiece of Ukraine's industrial economy fundamentally altered its social and economic structure and accelerated the development of a separate regional identity there. After Soviet planners decided to open chemical plants, steel mills, and coal mines in the Donbas, they quickly realized the region lacked the workers required to operate them. So the Soviet government—through both incentivized and forced population transfers—manned the new industries with migrants from Russia and Ukrainian peasants. The latter quickly assimilated to the Russophone factory life, and what emerged was a culture that identified with the glory of the Soviet mines and smokestack industries.²²

But these Soviet mines and industries were ill-equipped to compete in the open, globalized

¹⁹ Svitlana Shcherbak, interview with the author, April 24, 2016.

²⁰ Denys Kiryukhin, interview with the author, April 24, 2016.

²¹ International Crisis Group, "Rebels without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine", Europe report No. 254, July 16, 2019, p. 2.

²² Yekelchik, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 7.

economy that replaced the integrated, command economy of the Soviet Union. The economic collapse in the Donbas was relatively more severe than in the rest of Ukraine. First, the region had been a top economic producer in the Soviet period and so had farther to fall. Next, Soviet heavy industry was uniquely non-competitive in the global marketplace. Those jobs that were created in the post-Soviet Donbas were in the market consumer or producer services sectors, while the traditional economic sectors collapsed, so that “manual industrial workers and, most prominently, the unskilled and low skilled personnel have been the main loser of the urban economic reconstruction.”²³ Even many of those industries that managed to hang on for a time after the collapse of the Soviet Union eventually failed, with catastrophic economic results. In the town of Makiivka, for example, 6,000 workers lost their jobs when the Kirov Iron and Steel Works closed in 2008.²⁴ Finally, the close economic connections between the Donbas and Russia meant that the Association Agreements signed between Ukraine and the EU in March and June 2014 threatened the region’s already-damaged economic interests.²⁵

Compared to the rest of Ukraine, the social code in the Donbas has a strong authoritarian and paternalistic streak, little respect for the role for civil society, and a heavy dose of organized criminality.

The economic dislocation in the Donbas shattered the region’s Soviet-era aura of economic glory and contributed to a mutual resentment between it and more rural, agricultural central and western Ukraine. People in the Donbas say they are fed up with subsidizing the rest of Ukraine, while people in the center and west of the country say they are tired of subsidizing the “rust belt”

of the Donbas.²⁶ The truth about who subsidized whom in Ukraine is complicated. Before the war, Donetsk was the fifth richest of Ukraine’s 27 regions and so probably contributed more to the state’s coffers in absolute terms than it received. But the region’s mining industry was heavily subsidized by taxes levied on all Ukrainians, so budget transfers don’t tell the whole story. And Luhansk, the other province comprising the Donbas region, received more than it paid to state coffers.²⁷ In any case, the truth is less important in constructing identities and grievances against other groups than perception. And in Ukraine, the perception of unfair economic burden-sharing was mutual and strong.

The Donbas has a unique social code and outlook on life. The former stems from its early incorporation into the Russian Empire and its unique—for Ukraine, at least—social experience during the period of Soviet rule; the latter revolves around the dangers of working in mining and heavy industry. Compared to the rest of Ukraine, the social code in the Donbas has a strong authoritarian and paternalistic streak, little respect for the role for civil society, and a heavy dose of organized criminality. The lands of the Donbas came under control of the Russian Empire in 1654, but Russia did not annex much of the rest of Ukraine until the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century. The division in social structure widened during the Soviet period, when miners and workers, many with criminal backgrounds, migrated to the Donbas to work in its factories and mines. In the Donbas and some other Soviet industrial regions, the “thief-in-law” sat at the top of the social structure. The social order of the thief-in-law had a strict hierarchy, a code of conduct, and a set of violent or fatal punishments for transgressions. The thief-in-law culture permeated the social, economic, and political worlds of the Donbas. Former President Yanukovich, who hails from the region, did two prison terms for criminal activity, and some one-third of families in the area have a member who spent time in jail.²⁸

Almost all the Ukrainians interviewed for this

²³ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 139.

²⁴ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 139.

²⁵ Svitlana Shcherbak, interview with the author, April 24, 2016.

²⁶ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 137-8.

²⁷ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 141.

²⁸ Oleksy Melnyk, interview with the author, April 28, 2016.

report noted the unique outlook one life shared among residents of the Donbas. This outlook is largely constructed by the hardships of life in the mines and the factories, which make war seem less dangerous and destructive than it might to people accustomed to safer and more predictable lives. Several noted that going to war was no more risky—but also more lucrative—than working in the mines. One neatly summarized the dilemma this way, “You can die from an explosion in a mine or you can die from an exploding mine—what’s the difference?”²⁹

The Intersection of Identities

All people hold multiple identities. Political science research has shown that when cleavages in these identities align, civil war is up to 12 times more likely than when one type of identity is “cross-cut” by others.³⁰ In Ukraine, the historical-geopolitical and social-economic cleavages align almost perfectly. And while their alignment with the cleavage in ethno-linguistic identities is not perfect, there still exists a general tendency for Russian-speakers—especially those in the Donbas—to hold positive views of the Soviet past and a preference for future geopolitical alignment with Russia, to glorify the mines and heavy industry of the Donbas, and to subscribe to its unique social code and set of norms. The interaction of these identities and the cleavages among them is captured in this conclusion from the “Shrink Smart” academic study of cities in demographic decline:

*The Donbas’s absence of cultural and ethno-linguistic affinity with the Ukrainian nationalist project, combined with the depth of the economic depression suffered by the region and its industrially-oriented cities in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR . . . have led to a creeping sense of alienation in the region.*³¹

In other words, it was the combination of ethno-

linguistic and economic alienation from the rest of Ukraine that made separatism an attractive option in the Donbas. Serhey Yekelchuk provides an example of how ethno-linguistic and historical-geopolitical identities interact to raise the conflict potential, remarking that the “hybrid identity” of self-described ethnic Ukrainians listing Russian as their native language “correlated with an allegiance to the Soviet version of modernity and, after its disappearance, to the strong paternalistic regime in Russia.”³² Ukrainian political scientist Mikhail Pogrebinsky supports this claim by noting that the two main issues causing polarization in Ukraine were the status of the Russian language and the vector of Ukraine’s geopolitical integration.³³ In all of these examples, there is alignment between cleavages in ethno-linguistic, historical-geopolitical, and social-economic identities, making conflict more likely than had the cleavages in these identities cut across one another.

The Influence of External Actors

While factors internal to Ukraine raised its potential for conflict, there is a good argument to be made that the actions of external actors were also necessary for the outbreak of the war in the Donbas. Political scientist Peter Rutland captures the interplay of internal and external causes for war in Ukraine:

*It was Ukraine’s ambiguous geopolitical position, and the clumsy interventions of competing outside powers pursuing their own self-centered agendas, that pushed Ukraine’s log-jammed domestic politics over the brink into violent civil war.*³⁴

Russia is the external actor that bears primary responsibility for the war, but the West—both wittingly and unwittingly—contributed to its outbreak. Going back at least to the 2005 Orange Revolution, the Kremlin harbored deep suspicions that the West was trying to pull

29 Oleg Polkoyarchuk, interview with the author, April 28, 2016.

30 See, for example, Joshua R. Gubler and Joel Sawat Selway, “Horizontal Inequality, Crosscutting Cleavages, and Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 56, no. 2 (April 2012), p. 206-232.

31 Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 140-141.

32 Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 116.

33 Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 88.

34 Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 122.

Where the West cheered these events as uprisings by people tired of corrupt, undemocratic regimes, the Kremlin viewed them as plots by Western intelligence services to overthrow Russia-friendly governments.



Ukraine out of Russia's self-designated "zone of privileged interests." As Russian scholar Dmitrii Trenin has noted, instead of responding to the Western challenge by "working with political, business and society forces in Ukraine . . . to build a strong constituency for an independent Ukraine that would be friendly to Russia, the Kremlin continued to play with corrupt Ukrainian politicians."³⁵ The West, meanwhile, had been working with political, business, and civil society forces in Ukraine. These efforts were gradually making progress in building a constituency in favor of a Ukraine linked to the West politically and economically and with a robust, Western-style civil society, at least outside of the Donbas.

This tension over Ukraine's vector of integration—East or West—came to a head with the controversy over the signing of the EU Association Agreements in November 2013. When Yanukovich, chief among the "corrupt Ukrainian politicians" favored by the Kremlin, refused to sign the EU agreement and instead opted for membership in the EAEU, angry Ukrainians took to the streets in Kyiv. Western politicians, who saw in the protests a manifestation of the civil society and democratization process the West hoped to build in Ukraine, encouraged the protests. EU Enlargement Commissioner Štefan Füle said, "I am happy that democracy in Ukraine has reached the moment where the people are free to assemble and express their opinion, particular (sic) on the issue which is so relevant for their own future, the future of Ukraine."³⁶

While this may seem like a benign, scripted statement, it and other forms of Western support for the protests set off alarm bells in Moscow. Kremlin leaders saw the Maidan protests as another in the string of "color revolutions" that had broken out in Russia's "near abroad." Where the West cheered these events as uprisings by people tired of corrupt, undemocratic regimes, the Kremlin viewed them as plots by Western intelligence services to overthrow Russia-

friendly governments. The Russian paranoia about "color revolutions" even extended to the assumption that Moscow was their ultimate goal. Trenin notes that many in Moscow viewed them as a "new political technology . . . launched by Americans" that served as "a dress rehearsal of a potential regime change in Moscow."³⁷

In response, Russia decided to support the anti-Maidan protests that were breaking out in the Donbas. That support originated in think tanks like Russkiy Mir foundation and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, which promoted the idea of a "Russian world" with a homeland representing "much more than the territory of the Russian Federation;" they also started referring to eastern Ukraine as "Novorossiya."³⁸ Donbas activists and Russian policymakers claim that this thinking found its way into the Kremlin. In spring 2014, Vladimir Putin "reminded" people that much of eastern Ukraine was not part of Ukraine during tsarist times, but was "given" to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government, "only God knows" why.³⁹

Encouraged by the Kremlin's apparent support, Donbas activists seized government buildings in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, and several other eastern cities, and declared the independence of the "people's republics."⁴⁰ In truth, Kremlin policy on the issue of the Donbas was unclear and inconsistent. A split emerged between hawks favoring a repeat of the "Crimea scenario" and doves cautioning against it. Kremlin-linked businessmen exploited this confusion, acting on their own initiative to finance militias in the Donbas.⁴¹ Russian irregular forces began entering Ukraine in increasing numbers, mostly notably under former Russian intelligence officer Igor Girkin (nicknamed "Strelkov"), who used his militia to seize the police headquarters in Sloviansk, and then called on the Kremlin to send troops to back his move. This set the stage for a violent showdown with Ukrainian security forces determined to restore Kyiv's mandate in

35 Dmitrii Trenin, "Russia and Ukraine: From Brothers to Neighbors," Carnegie Moscow Center, March 21, 2018, internet resource at <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75847>, accessed September 16, 2019.

36 Euronews, "EU's Füle rues Ukraine's 'missed chance,'" November 26, 2013, internet resource at <https://www.euronews.com/2013/11/26/eu-s-fule-rues-ukraine-s-missed-chance>, accessed September 16, 2019.

37 Trenin, "Russia and Ukraine."

38 International Crisis Group, *Rebels without a Cause*, p. 3.

39 International Crisis Group, *Rebels without a Cause*, p. 4.

40 International Crisis Group, *Rebels without a Cause*, p. 4.

41 International Crisis Group, *Rebels without a Cause*, p. 4.



Shelling aftermath in Horlivka, 11 June 2015. (Mstyslav Chernov)

the restless provinces.

The fundamental flaw in Russia's view of the Maidan was that it missed the Ukrainian roots of the revolution, so fixated was it on the supposed intrigues of Western intelligence services. The flaw in the West's view was that it assumed Russia's frequent accusations that Western intelligence services were fomenting anti-Kremlin revolutions in Russia's neighbors to be Russian propaganda. In other words, Western leaders could not believe the Kremlin actually believed the Central Intelligence Agency was overthrowing Russia-friendly regimes, and ultimately hoped to overthrow the Putin government. Kremlin paranoia ran so deep that

even Western economic outreach to Ukraine was presumed to have ulterior, political motives. Kremlin leaders were determined to forestall the EU's attempts to open Ukraine's economy because of the presumed democratization that would follow in its wake. This combination of Kremlin fear of regime change and Western disregard for this fear led to the "clumsy interventions" of outside powers noted earlier. These clumsy interventions interacted with the identity cleavages inside Ukrainian society to produce a war in the Donbas that no one wanted and most thought impossible.⁴²

⁴² Ukrainian political scientists Denys Koryukhin and Svitlana Shcherbak described the war in the Donbas as happening "accidentally." Donbas long had held anti-Kyiv views, but there had been so many "false alarms" about separatism there, especially after the 2004-05 Orange Revolution, that few people took the threat of separatism seriously in early 2014.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR

The war's consequences have been profound. Ukraine is not the same country it was before 2014 in any meaningful sense. In some areas, it has proven surprisingly resilient; in others, the war has served as a catalyst for positive change; and in still others, its effects have been uniformly negative. The war fundamentally altered Ukraine's political landscape, proved a catastrophe for its economy, spurred the rapid development of its armed forces, left an indelible mark on the social-psychology of its people, and is causing horrendous damage to its environment. If the war's legacy on Kyiv-controlled Ukraine has been complex, its legacy in separatist-controlled Ukraine simply has been disastrous.

Political Consequences

Before 2014, Ukraine swung like a pendulum between East and West, both internally and geopolitically. Internally, the strong cleavage in identities between eastern and western Ukraine resulted in governments that had bases of power in one or the other, with the center of the country providing the swing votes. But no pre-war government had broad, national legitimacy. Geopolitically, Ukraine's pre-war governments tended to align themselves either with Russia or with the West, especially after the 2004-05 Orange Revolution. The Viktor Yushchenko government that took power in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution set Ukraine on the path of NATO accession, sparred with Russia over gas transit, and threatened to block the Russian Black Sea Fleet's use of the naval base in Crimea. Viktor Yanukovich, elected in 2010 and deposed in the 2014 Maidan Revolution, renounced Ukraine's NATO aspirations, made a gas deal with Russia, and extended Moscow's lease on the naval base in Crimea until 2042.

Russia's seizure of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in the Donbas broke the pendulum.

It did so by removing from the Ukrainian electorate some three million voters, most of whom had reliably voted for candidates favoring closer relations with Russia. Sociologist Dmitrii Gromakov sees the end of the East-West division in Ukrainian politics, and the emergence of a political consensus on the development of Ukraine along Western lines.⁴³ Mykhailo Pashkov of the Razumkov Centre, a Ukrainian think tank, believes the change in attitude of Ukrainians toward Russia is stable and unchanging: they see Russia as an aggressor, whose policy goal is the disintegration of Ukrainian statehood. Pashkov argues further that Ukraine's process of European integration is now irreversible and that there is no chance of Ukraine adopting the strong paternalistic state structure.⁴⁴

If the war's legacy on Kyiv-controlled Ukraine has been complex, its legacy in separatist-controlled Ukraine simply has been disastrous.

Russian scholar Dmitrii Trenin agrees, arguing that the war in the Donbas has ended the idea of a "Russian World" that includes Ukraine and has caused the formation of the Ukrainian political nation to rest on a clear anti-Russian platform.⁴⁵ While the consolidation of the Ukrainian political identity around Western themes is a natural outcome of Russia's role in the war, it is likely to be an impediment to an enduring peace and the reintegration of the Donbas and its people into the Ukrainian state and society. If the war has hardened identities around a Western model on Kyiv-administered Ukraine, then it's reasonable to assume that it has also hardened identities in separatist-administered regions. Solving the puzzle of how to fit both of these newly "hardened" identities inside the same national

⁴³ Dmitrii Gromakov, interview with the author, May 15, 2019.

⁴⁴ Mykhailo Pashkov, remarks at the Razumkov Centre conference, "Ways and Prospects for Conflict Resolution in Donbas," Kyiv, Ukraine, May 16, 2019.

⁴⁵ Trenin, "Russia and Ukraine."



Newly elected President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky was sworn in as Head of State on May 20, 2019.
(U.S. Embassy Kiev Ukraine)

identity will be a major challenge in securing a durable peace.

In addition to ending Ukraine's pendulum-like movement between East and West, the war in the Donbas caused what many have described as the collapse of the Ukrainian political elite.⁴⁶ Ukraine's post-Soviet political system had been defined by the cleavages described earlier, overlaid on political and economic patronage networks. In fact, some have argued that these patronage networks contributed to the start of the war.⁴⁷ Serhiy Shakhov, a former member of the Luhansk Oblast Council, argues that the conflict there began as one between rival groups of oligarchs, one of which was connected to Yushchenko and the other of which was connected to Yanukovich.⁴⁸ Political scientist Andrew Wilson agrees with the characterization of pre-war Ukrainian politics as infected with dueling networks of patronage and corruption. He argued that among Ukraine's cleavages, "the most powerful division is regional and regionally-

based patronal networks."

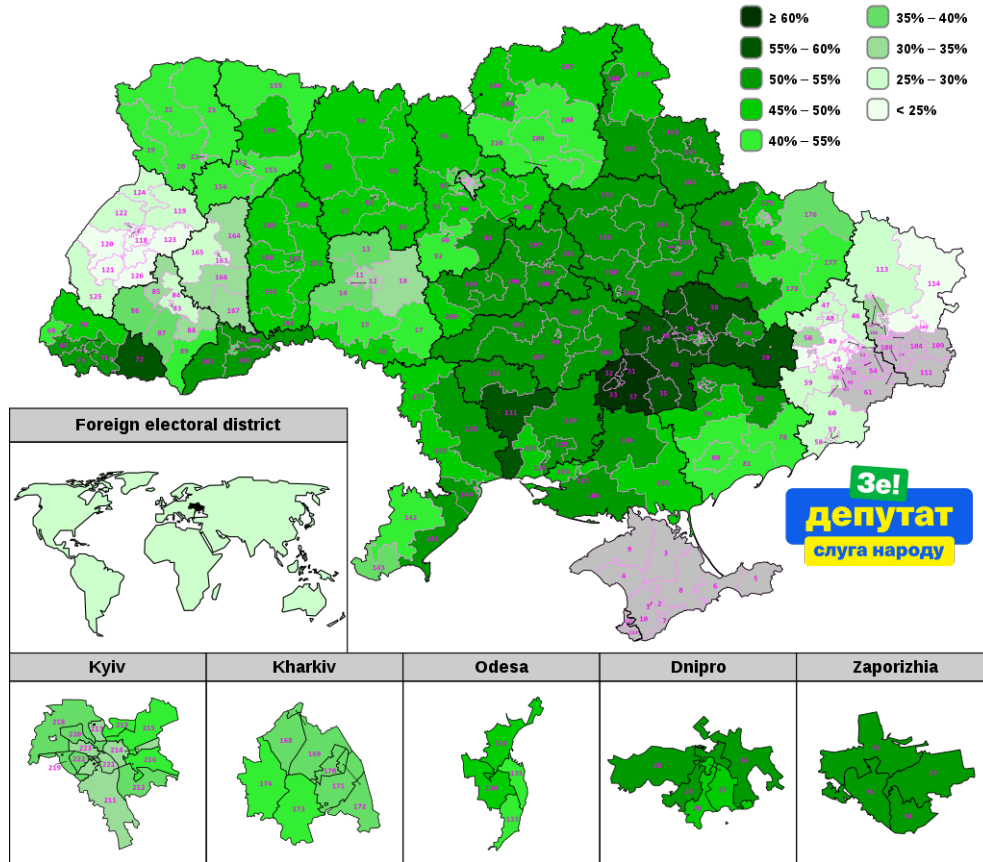
The election of Volodymyr Zelensky to the presidency—in part a result of the war's effects—is the main reason so many analysts assign the war a role in the collapse of the Ukrainian political elite. Zelensky is the first politician in Ukraine's post-Soviet history without a regional power base and without ties to patronage networks controlled by oligarchs, two staples of the country's political system between the collapse of the Soviet Union and 2014. Before Zelensky's emergence, Ukraine's politicians found it more expedient to exploit the cleavages in Ukrainian society than to pursue painful political and economic reform or nurture a unifying national identity.⁴⁹ Even Petro Poroshenko, elected soon after the start of the war, fit the old mold of Ukrainian politician. A business tycoon with a political base in the west of the country, Poroshenko's constant war rhetoric and exhortation for his people to devote themselves to the three pillars of "army-language-faith" contributed to a sense of exhaustion and

46 These themes came in up interviews with Denys Kiryukhin and Svitlana Shcherbak, May 14, 2019; Dmitrii Gromakov, May 15, 2019; and General Oleksandr Syrsky, May 21, 2019.

47 Serhiy Shakhov, interview with the author, April 27, 2016. Andrew Wilson and Peter Rutland also discuss the role of patronage networks in the war in Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa, eds. *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives* (Bristol, England: E-International Relations Publishing, 2016).

48 Serhiy Shakhov, interview with the author, April 27, 2016.

49 Yekelchuk, *The War in Ukraine*, p. 73.



Source: Electoral Geography 2.0

desire for change among Ukrainian voters.⁵⁰

Although Zelensky's election signals a collapse of traditional Ukrainian political elite and its patronage system, it does not guarantee its enduring defeat. If the Zelensky government proves more competent and less corrupt than its predecessors, it might set expectations for future governments. But the old guard will seize on any signs of ineptitude to argue that the state should not be entrusted to amateurs, especially in wartime. And a return to corrupt governance or reliance on patronage networks will convince skeptical Ukrainians that Zelensky is really no different from previous politicians.

But early signs are generally positive. First, Zelensky ushered in a new type of campaigning, and won at least in part because he was better able to communicate with Ukrainian society. Next, civil society is now a force in Ukrainian politics in a way it was not in previous elections. The war has contributed to a rise in civic activism in Ukraine, so even if the new administration reverts

to old ways, Ukrainian voters may exercise their right to toss it out of power.⁵¹ Finally, the July 2019 parliamentary election continued the shift in voting patterns and a rejection of the old ways presaged by Zelensky's election: 75% of those elected are new to the parliament, 20% are women (as opposed to 12% in last parliament), and the average age of the new parliament is 41 (it was 48 in the last parliament and 55 in the parliament before that one). The electoral map of the 2019 parliamentary election is unprecedented in Ukraine's post-Soviet history. Where most previous elections had seen strong cleavages in voting patterns between eastern and western Ukraine, the map of support for Zelensky's Servant of the People Party shows the strongest support in central Ukraine. The emergence of central Ukraine as an independent political force—rather than simply as the location of the dividing line between east and west—could presage a fundamental shift in Ukrainian politics.

The final political effect of the war is the decline of the far-right as a political force in Ukraine.

⁵⁰ Denys Kiryukhin and Svitlana Shcherbak, interview with the author, May 14, 2019.

⁵¹ Natalie Ishchenko, interview with the author, May 16, 2019.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the increased salience of the Ukrainian national identity since the start of the war, far-right parties have fared poorly in elections since 2014, failing to clear the 5% threshold required to enter parliament. One possible reason for this is that since the start of the war—and the loss of some three million voters in Crimea and the Donbas—the entire Ukrainian political spectrum has moved right. So parties that were more centrist have moved to the right-of-center, and presumably picked up voters who had previously voted for farther-right parties.

Prior to the war, far-right parties were surging in Ukraine and were building networks with other right-wing European parties. The largest and most well-known of these is the Freedom Party, which traces its origins to the Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU), a small extreme nationalist organization founded in 1991. In 2004, inspired to soften its image by contact with Western European right-wing nationalist parties, the SNPU changed its name to the “Svoboda,” or “Freedom,” Party and dropped its more overtly fascist symbology.⁵² Softening its image eventually paid off for Svoboda, which broke through in Ukraine’s 2012 parliamentary election, claiming 10.44% of the vote and 37 seats in the 450-member parliament. But by the next election in October 2014, Svoboda’s luster had worn off with voters, and it failed to clear the 5% threshold to enter parliament. In the July 2019 election, it slid further, garnering only 2.15% of the vote. The decline of Ukraine’s far-right is all the more significant, given the fact that far-right parties have been on the rise elsewhere in Europe since 2014.

The war’s effects on Ukraine’s political development have been significant. The forcible removal of some three million voters from the electorate has ended the tendency for Ukraine to swing like a geopolitical pendulum between Russia and the West, and for Ukrainian governments to be beholden to constituencies and patronage networks from eastern or western Ukraine. The emergence of Volodymyr Zelensky and his Servant of the People Party brings an

entirely new force onto the political landscape and represents the collapse of a Ukrainian political system centered on regionally based patronage networks of the east and west. And the evaporation of the far-right as a political force in Ukraine—in defiance of a general trend throughout Europe—could allow for a more inclusive politics that constructs a more inclusive Ukrainian national identity. This last factor will be crucial if Ukraine has any hope of reintegrating the Donbas and its voters after the war ends.

Economic Consequences

If the war’s consequences on Ukraine’s political development have been surprisingly positive, then the same cannot be said for its effect on Ukraine’s economy. This section provides an overview of the war’s effects on Ukraine’s economy as a whole, and its effects on the separatist-controlled parts of the Donbas. The war caused a collapse in Ukraine’s gross domestic product (GDP) even sharper than those it experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union and after the 2008 global recession. The country lost economic assets, some of which Russia and its separatist allies seized, and some of which were destroyed in the war. Trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) flows declined, the Hryvna slid against Western currencies, Ukraine’s debt load soared, and its economy endured a sudden, forced conversion away from industry and toward agriculture.

Scholar Anders Aslund assesses that the war had affected Ukraine in three ways. First, Russian or Russian-backed forces have seized assets worth almost \$100 billion.⁵³ Next, the war has destroyed enterprises, buildings, and infrastructure. As early as September 2014, then-Minister of Regional Development Volodymyr Groisman reported that 11,325 infrastructure facilities with a total value of UAH 11.9 billion (\$909 million at that time) had been destroyed. By 2017, this estimate had grown to some \$50 billion.⁵⁴ Separatist-controlled territories are home to 115 of Ukraine’s 150 coal mines, most of which have stopped working since the war began.⁵⁵ Finally,

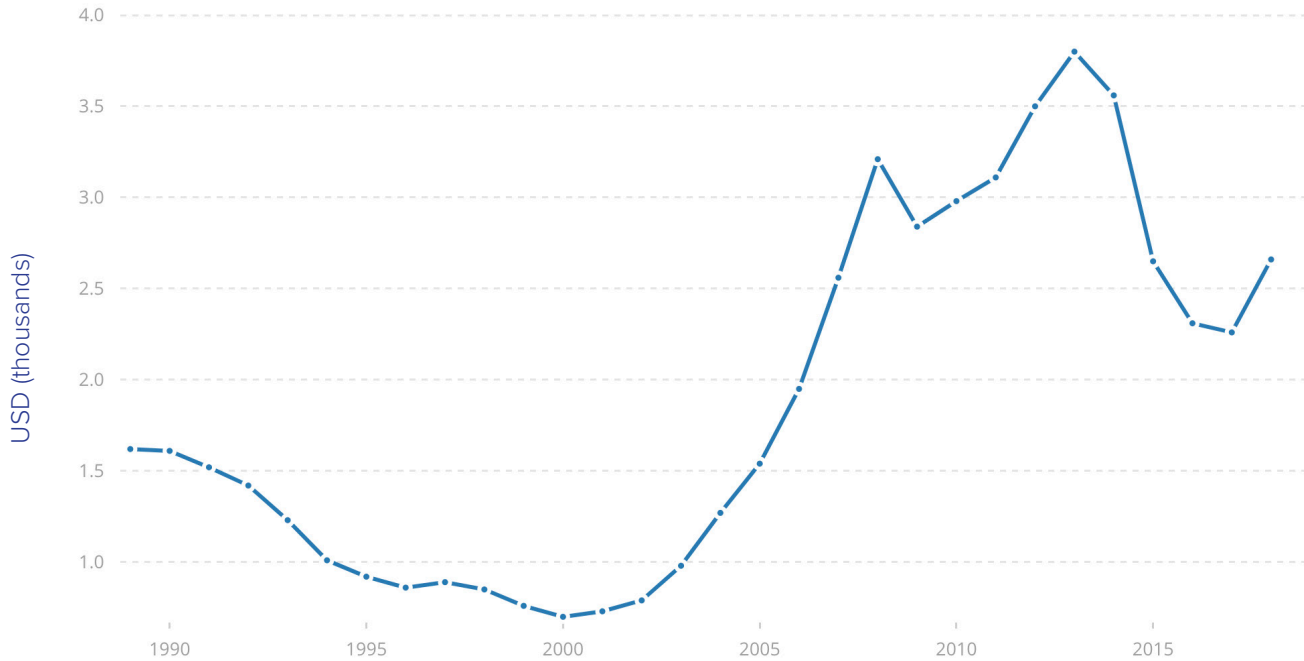
⁵² Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 175.

⁵³ Anders Aslund, “Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag,” Atlantic Council, March 2018, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Razumkov Centre, National Security and Defence, No. 1-2 (177-178), 2019, p. 42.

⁵⁵ Aslund, “Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag,” p. 9.

UKRAINE GNI PER CAPITA



Source: World Bank

the war has caused losses in economic flows due to Russian economic sanctions and the loss of FDI. Between 2012-2016, Ukraine's total exports fell by 47% (to Russia, by 80%); total imports in that period fell by 54% (from Russia, by 81%).⁵⁶ Not surprisingly, these losses, combined with the cost of fighting the war, have eroded the value of the Ukrainian Hryvna and added significantly to Ukraine's government debt. The value of the Hryvna against the dollar fell from approximately .12 to .04, and Ukraine's debt-to-GDP ratio spiked from 40.1% in 2013 to a high of 81% in 2016.⁵⁷

There are signs that Ukraine is recovering from the immediate effects of the war, however. Financial analyst Timothy Ash notes that the macroeconomic situation looks positive. The government is not facing an economic crisis for the first time in many years, the economy has returned to growth, inflation is in the single digits and falling, public debt is falling, the currency is stable, and the National Bank of Ukraine has installed a competent management team.⁵⁸

Aside from its effects on Ukraine's general economic health, the war has caused a sudden transformation in Ukraine's economic base. The destruction or loss of control over so many industrial facilities has forced Kyiv-controlled Ukraine to convert much of its economic activity from industry to agriculture. Before the war, Ukraine's exports were dominated by steel, machinery, agricultural products, and chemicals. Exports of steel will continue to fall and chemicals might be nearly eliminated since their manufacture was based on cheap Russian gas. The share of agriculture as a share of Ukraine's overall economy is set to continue to rise.⁵⁹ The problem with this, aside from the pain of the conversion itself, is that agriculture serves as a poor foundation for a modern, globally integrated economy. But the People's Republic of China may provide a lifeline for Ukraine's industrial economy, at least the high-tech part of it. Chinese interest in Ukraine's technology sector—especially in the areas of jet engines and aerospace industry—is steadily rising.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Aslund, "Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag," p. 11.

⁵⁷ "Ukraine Government debt to GDP," internet resource at: <https://tradingeconomics.com/ukraine/government-debt-to-gdp>, accessed September 17, 2019.

⁵⁸ Timothy Ash, "Ukraine's best shot for transformational change," *Kyiv Post*, July 31, 2019, internet resource at: <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/timothy-ash-ukraines-best-shot-for-transformational-change.html>, accessed October 11, 2019.

⁵⁹ Aslund, "Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag," p. 12.

⁶⁰ See, for instance, Anton Troianovski, "At a Ukrainian aircraft engine factory, China's military finds a cash-hungry partner," *Washington Post*, May 20, 2019, internet resource at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/at-a-ukrainian-aircraft-engine-factory-chinas-military-finds-a-cash-hungry-partner/2019/05/20/ceb0a548-6042-11e9-bf24-db4b9fb62aa2_story.html, accessed September 17, 2019.



Damaged furniture factory in Sloviansk. (Robert Hamilton)

The war has changed Ukraine's energy relationship with Russia. Ukraine still serves as a major transit country for Russian gas bound for Europe, handling one-third of total flows in that direction.⁶¹ But the contract governing transit of Russian gas through Ukraine expires at the end of 2019, and Kyiv and Moscow disagree on the length of the new contract. While Kyiv prefers a ten-year term, Moscow is pushing for a single year. Russia hopes to have Nordstream-2 and Turkstream—two pipelines that bypass Ukraine—running by the end of 2020, allowing it to reduce or eliminate gas transit through Ukraine. This situation puts Ukraine in the awkward position of seeing itself at war with Russia, but also arguing that Russian gas transit through its territory—and the \$3 billion in transit fees it brings in—are vital to Ukraine's economy.

As bad as the war's economic effects on Ukraine as a whole have been, the situation in separatist-controlled Ukraine is worse in every way. An economic collapse, migration of the most productive part of the population, and

reduced Russian assistance combined with greater Russian control have been the war's primary economic legacies. Although good data from the separatist-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk province is hard to come by, the data that is available tell a grim story. Anders Aslund estimates that the GDP of the regions fell by some 70% at the start of the war and has not recovered much since.⁶² By 2017, the volume of industrial production in the occupied territories was only one-third of its potential. Of the two largest industrial concerns there, one is operating at 20-30% capacity, and the other is essentially at a standstill.⁶³ The separatist-controlled regions are almost wholly dependent on imports of food due to their weak agricultural potential. For example, they must import 2.9 million tons of their annual grain requirements of 3.2 million tons.⁶⁴ Members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission, some of the only non-Russian internationals with regular access to separatist-controlled Ukraine, report that salaries there are less than 40% of those in Kyiv-controlled Ukraine. But since most consumer

61 Stephen Pfifer, "Heading for (another) Ukraine-Russia gas fight?," Brookings Institution, August 30, 2019, internet resource at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/08/30/heading-for-another-ukraine-russia-gas-fight/>, accessed September 17, 2019.

62 Aslund, "Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag," p. 8.

63 Razumkov Centre, *National Defence and Security*, p. 45.

64 Razumkov Centre, *National Defence and Security*, p. 45.

products are imported from Russia, they are more expensive than those on the Kyiv side of the line of contact.⁶⁵ They report that shortages of basic food items are common and that more people are growing their own food because imports from Russia and Belarus are expensive and often unavailable.⁶⁶

The separatist-controlled parts of the Donbas are almost entirely dependent on Russian support for their survival.

Not surprisingly, many of those with economic means and prospects reacted to the economic collapse in separatist-controlled Ukraine by leaving. The most pro-Ukrainian part of the Donbas before the war was the small, but educated, middle class, which left for Kyiv-controlled Ukraine almost immediately after the violence began. A year into the war some 45% of the pre-war population had fled, and “as the fighting dragged on and people began to build new lives elsewhere, it was clear that fewer and fewer would ever return.”⁶⁷ In June 2015, the Russian RBS Media estimated that the total population of separatist-controlled Ukraine was between 2-2.5 million and that 1 million or more of those were pensioners.⁶⁸ OSCE monitors’ observations support the data and lend it a human element. They say that almost the only civilians they come into contact with in the separatist-controlled regions and those with no capacity to leave are “grandparents with grandchildren.” They point to the city of Horlivka, located close to the line of contact in Donetsk Province. Before the war, Horlivka was a thriving industrial city, but now it is a “ghost city,” with block upon block of abandoned apartments.⁶⁹

The separatist-controlled parts of the Donbas are almost entirely dependent on Russian support for their survival. Leaked emails from Russian government officials involved in supporting the de facto regimes in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” show that over 50% of their operating budgets come from Russia. Saddled with the burden of bankrolling the separatist regimes, Russia has responded by taking greater control of their economies and reducing its level of support where possible. A Russian state-owned company meets 100% of the republics’ fuel supplies,⁷⁰ and the banking sector is largely under the control of RCNB, the Russian state bank for frozen conflict territories.⁷¹ OSCE monitors say that at the beginning of the war Russian humanitarian assistance convoys to the separatist-controlled regions often consisted of over 200 trucks, but now that number has dwindled to around 15, ten of which are escort vehicles.⁷²

Security Consequences

An assessment of the war’s effect on Ukraine’s security situation must begin with a picture of the state of the Ukrainian armed forces on the eve of conflict. This section does that, follows it with an assessment of their current capabilities, and then compares Ukraine’s modernized armed forces with those of the Russian-backed separatist regimes. It concludes by assessing Ukraine’s current ability to defend the territory it still controls.

To call the pre-war Ukrainian armed forces hollow is an understatement. People both inside and outside the Ukrainian government agree that on the eve of the war Ukraine had nothing approaching a modern military force. Tim Judah notes that since 1991 the Ukrainian military had been starved of funds. Virtually all of the budget

65 Members of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (names withheld by request), interview with the author, May 22, 2019.

66 Member of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (name withheld by request), interview with the author, July 12, 2019.

67 Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 142.

68 Anders Aslund, “Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag,” p. 3.

69 Members of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (names withheld by request), interview with the author, May 22, 2019.

70 Ayla Shandra and Robert Seely, *The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine*, (Royal United Services Institute, July 2019), pp. 32-33.

71 Aslund, “Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag,” p. 7.

72 Members of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (names withheld by request), interview with the author, May 22, 2019.



Life Along the Line of Contact Near Novhorodske



had gone toward (poor) salaries, and there was little left over for training and equipment despite the fact that from 2009-2013 Ukraine was the world's eighth largest arms exporter, with 3% of global sales. The problem was that "with money being stolen and siphoned off, the military could not afford the modern stuff, which the country's arms manufacturers exported."⁷³

Those inside the Ukrainian defense establishment at the time add context to Judah's observations. General Oleksandr Syrsky, former Commander of Joint Forces in eastern Ukraine and current Commander of the Ukrainian Ground Forces, admits that when the war began, Ukraine could only field a tactical group of a few hundred soldiers in each brigade—a formation that should have several thousand soldiers assigned to it.⁷⁴ Colonel Vlad Klochkov tells a similar story, recalling that on the eve of the war his brigade was supposed to have 4,000 soldiers, but could field only 300.⁷⁵ Giorgi Kalandadze, a former Georgian military officer now serving as a senior advisor to the commander of the Ukrainian National Guard, says that when he arrived shortly after the start of the war, Ukraine had an army of 200,000 on the books, but no more than 1,000 were fully trained and equipped.⁷⁶

Under the Yanukovich government, Ukraine had renounced its NATO aspirations and embarked on a restructuring program that downsized or eliminated exactly those capabilities that would be most needed in the war in the Donbas. The restructuring program slashed tanks, artillery, command and control, logistics and aviation, and envisioned reducing the size of the military to 50,000.⁷⁷ Unsurprisingly, when war broke out in the Donbas, the Ukrainian armed forces were in no position to fight it. The complete lack of organization and capability on the Ukrainian side allowed rebels, "with at least some Russian direction and help," to take territory quickly, given that there was initially no real resistance.

When asked in spring 2014 who was in charge on the Ukrainian side, a source in the security service told Tim Judah bluntly, "Nobody."⁷⁸ But by July, with help from volunteer units, the Ukrainian armed forces turned the tide, retaking Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Konstyantynivka, and Krasnoarmeyensk. For a moment, the Ukrainian advance looked unstoppable until Russian regular forces crossed the border to halt it.⁷⁹

Under the Yanukovich government, Ukraine had renounced its NATO aspirations and embarked on a restructuring program that downsized or eliminated exactly those capabilities that would be most needed in the war in the Donbas.

The Ukrainian armed forces of 2019 bear little resemblance to those of 2014. As former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine John Herbst noted, although the Ukrainian people said no to a second term for former President Petro Poroshenko, he deserves credit for rallying Ukrainians in the spring and summer 2014 and preventing Russia from taking control over all of Donetsk and Luhansk provinces.⁸⁰ Kalandadze agrees, arguing that Poroshenko did a lot for the armed forces, essentially turning them from a rabble into an effective fighting force.⁸¹

In dollar terms, Ukraine's defense budget rose from \$1.9 billion in 2013 to \$4.9 billion in 2019. It has increased its active duty force to some 250,000 and has increased their training, equipment, and effectiveness. In 2013, Ukraine conducted no training at the brigade-level or higher; in 2017, ground forces conducted 26

⁷³ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 164.

⁷⁴ General Oleksandr Syrsky, interview with the author, May 21, 2019.

⁷⁵ Colonel Vladimir Klochkov, interview with the author, May 18, 2019.

⁷⁶ Giorgi Kalandadze, interview with the author, May 14, 2019.

⁷⁷ General Oleksandr Syrsky, interview with the author, May 21, 2019.

⁷⁸ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 165.

⁷⁹ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 166.

⁸⁰ John Herbst, remarks at the Razumkov Centre conference, "Ways and Prospects for Conflict Resolution in Donbas," Kyiv, Ukraine, May 16, 2019.

⁸¹ Giorgi Kalandadze, interview with the author, May 14, 2019.

TABLE 1. BALANCE BETWEEN OPPOSING SIDES

System	Ukrainian Forces	Separatist Forces
Active Forces	250,000	28,000-28,500
Tanks	2,031	335-344
Armored Personnel Carriers	10,200	940-950
Multiple Rocket Launchers	500	123-130
Tube Artillery	738	340-350
Fighter/Attack Aircraft	123	0

exercises at that level.⁸² The army has received almost 8,000 new or modernized armored vehicles since the start of the war. The air force now boasts 71 fourth-generation fighters and has modernized or repaired at least 60 older aircraft since the start of the war.⁸³

Improvements in air defense and missile capabilities are also impressive. Ukraine has repaired or upgraded over 65% of its S-300 and 20% of its Buk-M1 air defense missile systems, significantly increasing its ability to protect large troop formations from enemy aircraft. In April, it successfully tested the Vilkha-M multiple-launch rocket system. The Vilkha-M's 130km range and improved accuracy reportedly make it superior to the Russian OTR-21 Tochka in both categories.⁸⁴ Overall, the Ukrainian armed forces have "made more strides to eliminate gaps in combat readiness in four years than in the previous twenty."⁸⁵ On their own, the forces of the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic are no match for the Ukrainian armed forces. The following table shows the balance between the opposing sides:⁸⁶

Aside from the obvious quantitative gap between the sides, OSCE monitors say that they perceive a growing qualitative gap. One monitor who recently returned from an extended period on the separatist side of the line of contact said of the soldiers of the separatist forces, "It's a pity to even call them that," so dirty, shabby, and depressed are they. The same monitor admitted to being very impressed with a Ukrainian operation in June 2019, which captured Volodymyr Tsemakh, a suspect in the shoot-down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17. Ukrainian forces slipped through separatist lines and made their way deep inside the territory of the Donetsk People's Republic to the city of Snizhne, some 20km from the Russian border. They raided Tsemakh's apartment, seized him, and brought him out to Kyiv-controlled territory. When asked how the separatist security forces could have allowed this to happen, the OSCE monitor replied, "Although the [Donetsk People's Republic] tries to show its professionalism, in reality it's a huge mess," with competing interest groups fighting each other, and security forces that are not educated or professional.⁸⁷

82 Mykola Bielieskov, "Ukraine's Military is Back," *National Interest*, February 27, 2018, internet resource at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/ukraines-military-back-24674>.

83 Bielieskov, "Ukraine's Military is Back."

84 Anton Mikhnenko, "Ukraine Expands Its Missile Capabilities," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 16, 2019, internet resource at: <https://jamestown.org/program/ukraine-expands-its-missile-capabilities/>, accessed September 18, 2019.

85 Bielieskov, "Ukraine's Military is Back."

86 Figures for Ukraine come from "Ukraine Military Strength 2019," published by *Global Firepower*, internet resource at: https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=Ukraine. Figures for separatist forces come from Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, pp. 36-38.

87 Member of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (name withheld by request), interview with the author, July 12, 2019.

The problem for Ukraine, of course, is that it is not fighting only the forces of the separatist regimes in the Donbas. If it were, then the forces could sweep them aside fairly easily, as it was poised to do in summer 2014 before Russian regular forces intervened to blunt and then reverse the Ukrainian advance. Russian involvement in the conflict consists of command and control elements, trainers and advisors, and some regular forces. Overall command of Russian and separatist forces resides in the 8th General Army Headquarters of the Southern Military District of the Russian Armed Forces. This headquarters manages the operation through the 11th Territorial Forces Administration.⁸⁸ The total Russian military presence in the Donbas is thought to be approximately 11,000—of which 2,000 are Special Forces soldiers, with the remainder comprising “volunteers,” mercenaries from private military companies, and regular army soldiers released from their units temporarily.⁸⁹

As in 2014, any Ukrainian operation that seeks a military solution to the war would draw a swift and overwhelming Russian response, and could give Russia an excuse to expand its war aims to include the seizure of additional Ukrainian territory. So although Ukraine’s armed forces are qualitatively and quantitatively superior to their 2014 incarnation and the separatist forces opposing them, a military solution to the conflict is not in sight.

Social-Psychological Consequences

The consequences of the war on Ukrainian society and the collective psychology of its people are difficult to measure. Nevertheless, in Kyiv-controlled territory, three broad patterns emerge. First, the war has contributed to the strengthening of a Ukrainian national identity separate from—and mostly in opposition to—Russia. Next, the war has caused displacement of millions of people, which has affected Ukrainian society in multiple ways. Finally, the war is felt differently across the country—Ukraine’s size makes the experience of the war very different

for those who live in the east than in other parts of the country. The war’s effect in separatist-controlled Ukraine is even more difficult to measure, given the lack of reliable statistics and indicators. But the picture that emerges there is one of paranoia and alienation from the rest of Ukraine, combined with a growing frustration at the inability of the de facto regimes to provide basic services and opportunities.

Dmitrii Trenin argues that the main reason Russia’s Ukraine policy has failed is that it ignores the fact that the Ukrainian elite “is permeated by a spirit of national independence, a dream of completing an age-old independent Ukrainian political project, which foresees separation from Russia.” But prior to 2014, Trenin argues that this dream was confined to the elite. In broader Ukrainian society, there was no chance of such a project being implemented due to the country’s close social, economic, and cultural links with Russia. The problem for the Ukrainian national project was Russia’s “tremendous soft power” in Ukraine: wide use of Russian language, the richness of Russian culture, and opportunities afforded by a much bigger neighbor. The national project could only succeed under conditions where Ukraine was isolated from Russia to the maximum extent possible, which has occurred since 2014.⁹⁰

Ukrainians perceive the war’s effects on their national unity in largely the same way Trenin does. They speak of a volunteer spirit, a national unity, and a determination to integrate with the West, none of which were widespread before 2014.⁹¹ Western diplomats working in Ukraine believe the war caused a major psychological shift in several areas. First, they see increasing use of the Ukrainian language, an upsurge in Ukrainian cultural markers, and more attempts to promote Ukraine abroad. They note a major shift in attitudes toward Russia, a neighbor Ukraine had “followed blindly” and which attacked it without warning in 2014.⁹²

The next effect of the war was the displacement of millions of people. In what Aleksandr Turchinov,

⁸⁸ Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, p. 36.

⁸⁹ Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, p. 38.

⁹⁰ Trenin, “Russia and Ukraine.”

⁹¹ Natalya Shah, interview with the author, May 20, 2019.

⁹² Western diplomat posted to Kyiv (name withheld by request), interview with the author, May 24, 2019.



SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF WAR IN THE DONBAS:

- ▶ Strengthening of Ukrainian identity separate — and mostly in opposition to Russia
- ▶ Displacement of millions of people within and outside Ukraine
- ▶ Diverse experiences of war between Eastern and Western parts of the country

head of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, describes as a “migration tsunami,” up to 9 million Ukrainians work abroad for some part of the year, and 3.2 million of those have full-time work. Most of these individuals have no plans to return.⁹³ Both push and pull factors are at work here: the start of the war in eastern Ukraine coincided with a growing need of the Visegrad Four countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—for labor. Another 1.7 million people—most from separatist-controlled territory—are registered as internally-displaced persons (IDPs) and are living elsewhere in Ukraine.⁹⁴ The unemployment rate among IDPs is 14% higher than the general population, and their average monthly income is only about \$98, compared to \$178 for the average Ukrainian. Furthermore, the IDP average income is below the subsistence level calculated by the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine.⁹⁵ The lack of opportunity for IDPs has led to an increase in human trafficking. Officials at the International Organization on Migration, the United Nations Migration Agency, report that they are now assisting around 1,200 victims a year, far higher than before the war.⁹⁶

People perceive the war’s effects differently in different parts of Ukraine. In Kyiv-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine, people say they still hear gunshots from the line of contact at night, and they are aware that their homes lie within artillery range of separatist forces. People outside of these regions feel no physical danger from the war, but send their sons and daughters to fight in it, so they experience the war primarily when coffins return home for burial.⁹⁷

The Ukrainian government and armed forces, which long had ignored the economic depression in eastern Ukraine, have begun investing in Kyiv-controlled parts of the east. This is especially visible in Kramatorsk, home to the Ukrainian

Army’s Joint Force Operation Headquarters and the Donetsk Regional Administration, which moved from Donetsk City at the start of the war. The Ukrainian Army has built bridges, demined extensive territory, and donated medical equipment in and around Kramatorsk.⁹⁸ OSCE monitors who first arrived in Kramatorsk in 2015 remember it as a gray and dirty place, where a statue of Vladimir Lenin still stood on the central square. They now say the city has recovered in many places and is much more visually attractive. But they worry about a lack of broad economic development and lament that Ukrainian authorities often come up with “brilliant ideas that they never finish.”⁹⁹

In separatist-controlled areas, the war’s social and psychological legacy is almost uniformly negative. OSCE monitors working there perceive a growing sense of mistrust bordering on paranoia. A “Soviet mentality” survives—people fear interaction with others and fear saying anything that can be used against them. There is an especially high level of mistrust of anyone from the “enemy world” outside of Russia, Donetsk People’s Republic, and Luhansk People’s Republic. The paranoia and mistrust are fed by a growing Soviet-style state security apparatus in the separatist-controlled areas.¹⁰⁰

Set against this fear is a growing sense of frustration at the seemingly endless conflict, lack of economic opportunity, and repressive state security presence. OSCE monitors describe people as losing hope, and so deeply upset that their frustration overcomes their fear and they are willing to speak out against the authorities. Although people are still only speaking out as individuals, there are more of them than in the past. This battle of fear and frustration has been a significant legacy of the war in separatist-controlled Ukraine.

93 Denys Kiryukhin, “Losing Brains and Brawn: Outmigration from Ukraine,” Focus Ukraine blog of the Kennan Institute, internet resource at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/losing-brains-and-brawn-outmigration-ukraine-0>, accessed September 18, 2019.

94 Aslund, “Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag,” p. 3.

95 International Organization on Migration, *National Monitoring System Report on the Situation of Internally Displaced Persons*, December 2018, pp. 6-7.

96 Officials at the International Organization on Migration (names withheld by request), interview with the author, May 13, 2019.

97 Hennady Ivanenko, Deputy Head of the (Kyiv-controlled) Luhansk Regional Administration, remarks at the Razumkov Centre conference, “Ways and Prospects for Conflict Resolution in Donbas,” Kyiv, Ukraine, May 16, 2019.

98 General Sergei Naev, former Commander of Joint Forces in eastern Ukraine, interview with the author, May 17, 2019.

99 Member of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (name withheld by request), interview with the author, May 24, 2019.

100 Members of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (names withheld by request), interviews with the author, May 22 and 24, 2019.

Environmental Consequences

The environmental consequences of the war are largely unknown outside of Ukraine, but may prove to be its longest-lasting and most difficult legacy. Before the war, the Donbas was one of the oldest and most fully integrated industrial regions in Europe. Its mining industry dates from the early 18th century and its heavy industry dates from the 19th century but was significantly expanded in the Soviet period. There are currently 176 potentially hazardous facilities in the Donbas, including coal mines, hydro-engineering facilities, pipelines, and oil fields. Of these, 99 are currently located in separatist-controlled territory.¹⁰¹

Abandoned mines pose the largest and most urgent environmental hazard. Once a mine is abandoned and ground water is no longer pumped out, it fills the abandoned mine cavities, causing multiple environmental problems, including air, water, and soil pollution and ground subsidence. Mine flooding has increased the levels of methane and radon in the air around the mines,¹⁰² and can push methane gas into the cellars of nearby buildings, creating an explosion hazard.¹⁰³ There are at least 35 mines in the Donbas that are already flooded and are beyond repair. Another 70 are in the process of shutting down and will inevitably flood. Reasons for the closure of mines include economic insolvency, and damage or destruction from military operations. Annual runoff of contaminated water from the already-flooded mines totals some 760 million cubic meters, and deposits almost 2.5 million tons of salts and other contaminants—possibly including mercury, lead, and arsenic¹⁰⁴—into the Severniy Donets River and the Sea of Azov.¹⁰⁵ Environmental specialists are especially “concerned about the flooding of the Oleksandr-Zakhid, whose underground areas

were contaminated by waste from the Horlivka chemical plant in the 1980s.”¹⁰⁶

Perhaps most worrying is the state of the YunKom Mine, where in 1979 Soviet scientists set off an underground nuclear explosion in the hope of clearing gases from deep in the mine.¹⁰⁷ YunKom at the time was the oldest mine in the Central Donbas, and was 915 meters deep. Plans called for digging further and mining at a depth of 1,250 meters. The problem was that below 600 meters in depth, toxic gas began escaping from seams in the bedrock. Scientists from the Skochinsky Institute of Mining near Moscow came up with a plan: they would place a nuclear bomb inside a chamber at the deepest part of the mine and explode it. The hope was that the force of the explosion would create “tears” in the bedrock seams, forcing the seeping gas out and to the top of the mine.

Although the explosion did decrease the level of gas, it cracked the roof of the mine, making it unstable in that area and forcing the abandonment of plans to dig down to 1,250 meters.¹⁰⁸ Fortunately, the Soviet scientists decided not to try this method in other mines. Until April 2019, pumps kept the area of the mine where the nuclear blast occurred dry. But in April, the de facto government of the Donetsk People’s Republic announced that the \$9.5 million required for upkeep and repair of the pumps was prohibitive and that in any case “comprehensive scientific studies” had concluded that the flooding of the mine posed no environmental risk.¹⁰⁹

Ukrainian and Western policymakers and many environmental experts disagree. Warning of a “second Chernobyl,” Ukraine’s ecology minister

101 Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, p. 62.

102 Kristina Hook and Richard “Drew” Marcantonio, “War-related environmental disaster in Ukraine,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 16, 2018, internet resource at: <https://thebulletin.org/2018/10/war-related-environmental-disaster-in-ukraine/>, accessed September 26, 2019.

103 Hanna Sokolova, “In Ukraine’s Donbas, mines are facing flooding — and environmental disaster,” *Open Democracy*, March 12, 2019, internet resource at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-donbas-mines-flooding-and-environmental-disaster/>.

104 Kristina Hook and Richard “Drew” Marcantonio, “War-related environmental disaster in Ukraine.”

105 Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, p. 62.

106 Hanna Sokolova, “In Ukraine’s Donbas, mines are facing flooding — and environmental disaster.”

107 Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, p. 62.

108 Serhiy Harmash, “Truth about the nuclear explosion at the YunKom mine. Witnesses’ testimonies,” *Ostrovo*, August 10, 2018, internet resource at: <https://www.ostrovo.info/articles/249/>, accessed 24 September 2019.

109 Halya Coynash, “Russia’s Donbas proxies flood YunKom Mine despite risk of radioactive catastrophe,” *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, April 18, 2019, internet resource at: <http://khp.org/en/index.php?id=1524000997>, accessed September 24, 2019.



Metallurgical plant in Ukraine. (Adobe Stock)

told members of the European Parliament, “What the militants are playing at is nothing other than terrorism and political blackmail.”¹¹⁰ U.S. State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert wrote on Twitter, “Plans by Russian proxies to flood the abandoned YunKom coal mine . . . could threaten drinking water of thousands of Ukrainians in Russia-controlled eastern Ukraine.”¹¹¹ A report by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe called YunKom “a singular threat” and warned that it “could release up to 500 cubic meters of radiation-contaminated mine waters into the ground water table.”¹¹² If these assessments are correct and runoff from this mine adds nuclear contamination to the salts and other contaminants already being deposited into the water table, the water supply of the region could become so contaminated as to be permanently undrinkable within two decades.¹¹³

In addition to contaminating the water supply, the abandoned, flooded mines increase the

risk of medium-intensity earthquakes due to hydrogeomechanical shocks.¹¹⁴ Soil “slumping” or ground subsidence is another serious problem with no readily available solution. Also caused by the flooding of abandoned mines, ground subsidence averages 25cm in Donetsk City on average and is up to 92cm in some parts of the city. Ground subsidence damages buildings, other structures, and utility connections.¹¹⁵ Directly above the abandoned mine tunnels, the problem is even more severe: flooding has destabilized some 9 billion cubic meters of mine tunnels throughout the Donbas, causing some 8,000 square kilometers of land above them to subside by an average of 1.75 meters.¹¹⁶

Aside from abandoned mines, other hazardous, but unmonitored, facilities in the Donbas include the Donetsk State Chemical Plant, where radioactive waste has been dumped since 1963, and the Horlivka State Chemical Plant with its stock of mononitrochlorobenzene, a hazardous

110 Daniel McLaughlin, “Ukraine fears ‘second Chernobyl’ if militants flood nuclear bomb mine,” *Irish Times*, April 19, 2018, internet resource at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/ukraine-fears-second-chernobyl-if-militants-flood-nuclear-bomb-mine-1.3467275>, accessed September 24, 2019.

111 McLaughlin, “Ukraine fears ‘second Chernobyl’ if militants flood nuclear bomb mine.”

112 McLaughlin, “Ukraine fears ‘second Chernobyl’ if militants flood nuclear bomb mine.”

113 Members of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (names withheld by request), interview with the author, May 22, 2019.

114 Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, p. 62.

115 Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, p. 63.

116 Kristina Hook and Richard “Drew” Marcantonio, “War-related environmental disaster in Ukraine.”



“Donbas has the highest density of land mines in the world - 40 people each month are killed or injured by mines.”

- Razumkov Center

compound used in the manufacture of drugs, pesticides, oil additives, and other chemicals. These and other facilities are causing chemical pollution of the soil and bed silt of the regional river network, which environmental experts describe as irreversible.¹¹⁷ Finally, they are contributing to increased contamination of the air with methane, radon, and chemical compounds.

In total, the cost of the environmental clean-up could rival the \$61.6 billion it took to remediate the effects of the BP Deepwater Horizon accident in the Gulf of Mexico.

Military operations associated with the war have destroyed industrial enterprises and contributed to the uncontrolled dumping of hazardous waste. The war has destroyed 530,000 hectares of land, including 18 wildlife preserves with a total area of 80,000 hectares. Fires caused by military operations have destroyed 150,000 hectares of forest in the conflict zone.¹¹⁸

Mines of another sort—specifically, land mines—present another long-term environmental challenge. The conflict zone is the largest and most densely mined area in the world; the cost of de-mining it is estimated at \$1 billion.¹¹⁹ Reliable estimates of the total number of mines in the conflict zone are unavailable, but as of July 2018, de-mining efforts in only 3.7% of the potentially mined areas had found and neutralized some 340,000 mines and pieces of unexploded ordnance.¹²⁰ Casualties to mines have totaled nearly 2,000 since the start of the conflict.¹²¹ In 2018, 43% of civilian casualties were due to mines and unexploded ordnance, and mine incidents

were the leading cause of child casualties.¹²²

In total, the cost of the environmental clean-up could rival the \$61.6 billion it took to remediate the effects of the BP Deepwater Horizon accident in the Gulf of Mexico.¹²³ Given that this sum is over \$20 billion larger than Ukraine's entire 2019 state budget, it is clear that the country cannot bear this cost alone.

There are signs that the war in the Donbas has reached an inflection point; a solution might be within reach. The exhaustion and frustration of people in the separatist-controlled regions, Russia's changing policy on the war—at least in part a result of rising frustration among the Russian public—and the election of a new Ukrainian government without regional ties or ties to networks of oligarchs all contribute to the possibility of a settlement. But even if Ukraine, the separatist regimes, the West, and Russia can agree to stop the fighting and craft a durable political settlement to the war, its environmental legacies will persist for decades and could cause untold human and environmental damage.

117 Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, p. 62.

118 Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, p. 63.

119 Razumkov Centre, *National Security and Defence*, p. 64.

120 Elena Ostanina, "Landmines in the Donbas conflict zone: threats for the population and the necessity of mine clearance," *Heinrich Boell Stiftung*, July 17, 2018, internet resource at: <https://www.boell.de/en/2018/07/17/landmines-Donbas-conflict-zone-threats-population-and-necessity-mine-clearance>, accessed September 26, 2019.

121 "Ukraine," The HALO Trust, internet resource at: <https://www.halotrust.org/where-we-work/europe-and-caucasus/ukraine/>, accessed September 26, 2019.

122 Oksana Grytsenko, "Clearing landmines in Ukraine, one careful step at a time," *UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency*, April 2, 2019, internet resource at: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2019/4/5ca200c04/clearing-landmines-ukraine-careful-step-time.html>, accessed September 26, 2019.

123 Anders Aslund, interview with the author, July 26, 2019.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The war in the Donbas will have effects on Ukraine that persist long after it is settled. Ukraine's political system and economy will never be the same as they were before the war. No matter the type of end the war comes to, Ukraine's security environment will have changed fundamentally. After having been attacked unexpectedly by a neighbor it had long looked up to, no longer will it be able to sleepwalk through its security planning or chronically under-resource its military. The social dislocations and psychological scars of the conflict are deep and will be long-lasting, especially in the separatist-controlled regions. And finally, the war's environmental damage likely will take decades to fix and cost money that Ukraine does not have.

Despite this somewhat gloomy prognosis, prospects for settling the war are better now than at any time since it started, for three reasons. The first is the exhaustion and frustration in the separatist-controlled Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. Those who supported breaking away were motivated by a mixture of fear—stoked by Russian propaganda—of the “fascism” emanating from Kyiv, and the prospect of better economic opportunities through partnership with Russia. Neither the “fascist” threat from Kyiv nor the economic lifeline from Moscow has appeared. The next reason for optimism is Russia's changing attitude toward the war, which is at least in part a result of the Russian public's dissatisfaction with Kremlin policy in Ukraine. Finally, the election of Volodymyr Zelensky to the Ukrainian presidency and the control of parliament by his party gives a mandate to a government uniquely positioned to bring the disparate parts of Ukraine together under a single national identity and ideal.

Settling the conflict is one thing, setting Ukraine on a course for long-term stability is another. Doing this requires solving two problems that have vexed Ukraine for the duration of its post-

Soviet incarnation. The first is corruption. Ukraine long has been one of the most corrupt countries in Europe, and this corruption has pernicious, far-reaching effects that undermine Ukraine's economy, security, society, and government. The next challenge is the creation of a broad-based, civic national identity. Without doing this, Ukrainian leaders have no chance of reintegrating the residents of the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic and healing the broader cleavages in identity that have undermined the country for generations.

Reasons for Optimism

As noted above, the exhaustion and frustration in the separatist-controlled territories, Russia's changing attitude toward the war, and the new government in Ukraine all give grounds for cautious optimism about resolving the conflict in the Donbas. Both formal surveys and anecdotal evidence point to the fact that people in the separatist-controlled parts of Ukraine are frustrated, exhausted, and willing to give a chance to whatever settlement provides them security and even a modicum of economic opportunity. An OSCE monitor who spends several months a year in separatist-controlled Horlivka says that things are worse every time she returns there. Economic conditions are declining, poverty is widespread, and basic goods are ever-more expensive. Horlivka's population continues to decline, and those who remain in the city are more anxious and reserved.¹²⁴

The International Crisis Group conducted extensive interviews in separatist-controlled areas of Ukraine in spring 2019. These interviews revealed that people are tired of the war and are “ready to side with anyone who offers a plausible plan for fixing infrastructure, supplying aid and resolving the question of the region's political status.” The same set of interviews revealed that most of the residents of the separatist-controlled regions prefer to remain part of Ukraine, but that

¹²⁴ Member of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (name withheld by request), interview with the author, July 12, 2019.



Cafes in Kramatorsk. (Robert Hamilton)

many of them don't care where they end up as long as they have security.¹²⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty conducted a series of interviews in the Donbas recently. Poignant quotes from these interviews reveal the depth of Donbas residents' despair. Anna, a pensioner, said, "Any hope for change fades with each day, so Kyiv should get moving, because things are only getting darker here." Kyrylo, a pro-Russian resident, expressed the view that "there is only disappointment. Putin abandoned us. People here are very angry with him." Valentina, a pensioner who lives in Luhansk with her daughter and three foster children, worries that since her two pensions—one local and one Ukrainian—only amount to about \$125 a month, she will be unable to feed the five mouths in her home.¹²⁶ Disappointed by Moscow's inability or unwillingness to improve their lives, and alienated from Kyiv, the region appears ambivalent about its future.

But the fact that people are alienated from Kyiv and its policy toward them doesn't mean they have no contact with the rest of Ukraine. There are between 750,000 and 1,000,000 monthly

crossings from separatist-controlled territory to Kyiv-controlled territory.¹²⁷ People come to pick up pension checks and to shop because the quality and selection of products are better—and prices are lower—on the Kyiv-controlled side. This regular exposure to "the other side of the line" provides an opportunity for the Ukrainian government to showcase its ability to provide security and economic opportunity, two things in short supply in separatist-controlled Ukraine.

Added to the exhaustion and frustration of ordinary residents of separatist-controlled Ukraine is a growing divide between ordinary people and the de facto authorities there. The de facto governments and their military forces, which were overwhelmingly manned by Ukrainians at the start of the war, are now largely manned by Russians. By one expert's estimate, the armed forces of the separatist regimes are now only 40% locals, with the remainder of the fighters coming from Russia.¹²⁸ U.S. State Department officials say the "true believers" in the idea of "Novorossiya"—an expansive pro-Russian proto-state encompassing all of eastern

125 International Crisis Group, *Rebels without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine*, p. 14.

126 All interviews come from *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, "I Don't See a Future Here": Life in eastern Ukraine After five Years of War," internet resource at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/life-in-eastern-ukraine-five-years-after-war/29858512.html#t-5>, accessed September 19, 2019.

127 The lower figure comes from Anders Aslund, "Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag," p. 9. The higher figure comes from officials at the U.S. Department of State (names withheld by request), interview with the author, July 26, 2019.

128 Vitali Kulyk, interview with the author, April 25, 2016.

and southern Ukraine—have been replaced by Kremlin agents with more modest goals.¹²⁹ OSCE monitors say they rarely get to talk to separatist authorities, who are usually under orders not to talk, but when they do, they get a very different picture than they do from ordinary people. One monitor noted that local officials echo the official propaganda about how good things are, but from ordinary people she hears that the economy is collapsing, factories are closing, and the only economic opportunities are to join the separatist military forces or to get seasonal work on a farm.¹³⁰

The International Crisis Group's report on the conflict concludes that there are three distinct groups in separatist-controlled Ukraine. The first is the proxy leadership, dependent on Moscow and with no clear policy goals or support base of its own. The second is made up of ideological separatists, whose hopes of joining Russia remain unfulfilled. The third is the majority of the population, worn out by the war and frustrated by the seeming indifference of both Kyiv and Moscow.¹³¹ Focusing on the third group might provide a way for Ukraine to end the war on terms that preserves its territorial integrity and addresses the real hardships of people in separatist-controlled regions. But the fact that Moscow's proxies now control the separatist regimes means that Russia is still necessary to any enduring settlement.

Fortunately, Russia's policy on the war in Ukraine has evolved over time, and current Kremlin views make a settlement more achievable than in the past. In spring 2014, outside of Crimea, where Russia's strategy was clear and deliberate, Moscow played an opportunistic game in Ukraine rather than relying on a clear strategy and objectives. In intercepted phone calls, Putin advisor Sergei Glazyev is heard attempting to organize protests in Odessa and Kharkiv. Emails from Vladislav Surkov, Putin's advisor on Ukraine, and others indicate that although Odessa and Kharkiv were the priority

regions after Crimea and the Donbas, Russia also hoped to organize separatist movements in Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolayiv Oblasts. The intent of all this activity appears to have been to destabilize and possibly break up Ukraine without having to resort to military violence.¹³²

“Any hope for change fades with each day, so Kyiv should get moving, because things are only getting darker here.”

- Anna, pensioner

After the conflict ramped up in summer 2014, Russia's goals expanded. It was at this time that Putin and other Kremlin leaders began to use rhetoric about “Novorossiya,” implying a historical Russian claim to essentially all of eastern and southern Ukraine. The Kremlin remained fixated on taking the war to Kharkiv until at least the end of 2014. An October email from Russian Duma Deputy Alexei Muratov to Inal Ardzinba, an unofficial “curator” of Kremlin policy on Ukraine, shows this fixation. The email contained options for bringing the “Russian World” to Kharkiv, including both overt and illegal political protests and conducting sabotage (covertly and illegally) “until such time as Kharkiv could be invaded from the occupied Donbas region or the nearby Russian oblast’ of Belgorod.”¹³³ But an informal poll conducted among 150 “businessmen, middle class, and poor” residents, and forwarded to Surkov on June 4, 2015, showed that separatism had become politically unpopular and had little traction. Further analysis showed “a shift away from pro-Russian sentiment among a tired and apathetic local population.”¹³⁴

The failure of the Kremlin's attempt to expand the war to Kharkiv, along with stiffening resistance

129 Officials at the U.S. Department of State (names withheld by request), interview with the author, July 26, 2019.

130 Member of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (name withheld by request), interview with the author, July 12, 2019.

131 International Crisis Group, *Rebels without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine*, pp. i-iii.

132 Ayla Shandra and Robert Seely, *The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine*, (Royal United Services Institute, July 2019), pp. 35-36.

133 Shandra and Seely, *The Surkov Leaks*, p. 39.

134 Shandra and Seely, *The Surkov Leaks*, p. 39.



Disappointed by Moscow's inability or unwillingness to improve their lives, and alienated from Kyiv, the region appears ambivalent about its future.

Top image: Supermarket in Kramatorsk. Bottom image: Sausage factory in Sloviansk (Robert Hamilton)



from the Ukrainian military, which made the capture of Mariupol unlikely, caused Russia to scale back its goals. A change in Kremlin rhetoric followed: official references to Novorossiia began disappearing and belligerent rhetoric on state TV referring to the government in Kyiv as a “fascist junta” diminished.¹³⁵ As Tim Judah puts it, the expansive fantasy of a Novorossiia all the way to Bessarabia had collapsed and was being replaced with the uncomfortable reality of a frozen conflict.”¹³⁶

With the change in policy, Moscow began removing Donbas leaders that led the initial fight with those it could better manage. Militia leader Igor Girkin was one of the first to go. As a Kremlin-connected policymaker told the International Crisis Group, “He went over there and started this mess . . . and now we are cleaning it up.”¹³⁷ On the one hand, the replacement of leaders like Girkin with proxies loyal to Moscow is useful because it removes zealots from the equation. And Moscow’s more pragmatic goals should be easier to accommodate than its previous expansive “Novorossiia” dreams. On the other hand, Moscow’s co-opting of the separatist leadership means the conflict is now even more of a hostage to Russia’s relations with the West than it was in the past. Russia’s current strategy revolves around beefed-up support to the separatist military forces to allow them to hold the territory they have seized. For Putin, this was “if not exactly glorious, still a useful outcome” because it hurt Ukraine’s chances of Western integration.¹³⁸

But even these more modest goals are beginning to grate on Russian public opinion. And while Russia may not be a democracy, public opinion very much matters to Kremlin decision-makers. Russian public opinion increasingly is skeptical about the cost of the Kremlin’s interventions in Ukraine and Syria. Abbas Gallyamov, a Russian political consultant and former speechwriter for Putin, believes the Kremlin has a “tough home agenda” due to the decreasing appetite of the Russian public for foreign engagements of the Ukraine variety. Gallyamov, who has run voter

focus groups in Russia for years, says that public interest in foreign affairs is declining and that more voters believe Russia’s foreign adventures come at the cost of government attention to domestic concerns.

In the immediate aftermath of the Russian seizure of Crimea, voters were uninterested in domestic affairs. Gallyamov says that when he ran voter focus groups in 2014-15, participants would turn even a subject like declining wages into a foreign policy discussion, blaming U.S. sanctions on Russia for their economic woes. Voters were emotional and would shout over each other, competing to denounce the U.S. and Ukraine. By 2016, voters were still denouncing the U.S. and Ukraine but without emotion, and the focus group moderator had to steer the discussion to that topic to elicit this response. By summer 2017, Gallyamov says people were uninterested in foreign affairs altogether, preferring to talk about issues that affected them directly. By 2018, the consensus in focus groups was that the government should stop paying attention to Ukraine and Syria and start paying attention to the people. Gallyamov assesses that the Russian people are tired of what they see as the Kremlin’s aggressive foreign policy and that the government is facing “severe problems with public opinion.”¹³⁹

U.S. experts largely agree with Gallyamov’s assessment. At a lunch of Russia experts in July 2019, participants noted that in 2014-15 Russians were spurred by media propaganda to support Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Media depictions of the new Ukrainian government as a “fascist junta” and stories claiming that groups of fascists and “Banderites” were marching on Crimea helped marshal overwhelming public support for the Kremlin’s intervention there. But five years later, “the fascists haven’t come over the wall,” and the Russian people are starting to be skeptical about Kremlin propaganda on Ukraine. Many people are asking why the government is spending so much money on foreign interventions, especially when those interventions have resulted in Western sanctions that have cut an estimated 1%

135 International Crisis Group, *Rebels without a Cause: Russia’s Proxies in Eastern Ukraine*, p. 14.

136 Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 170.

137 International Crisis Group, *Rebels without a Cause: Russia’s Proxies in Eastern Ukraine*, p. 8.

138 Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 170.

139 Abbas Gallyamov, interview with the author, July 23, 2019.

from Russia's annual GDP growth for the last five years.¹⁴⁰

Finally, Russian public opinion polling supports the contention that support for the Kremlin is falling in Russia and that voters want the government to pay attention to them instead of embarking on foreign adventures. Surveys by the Levada Center, a respected Russian public opinion analytical center, show a sustained fall in support for the government. After a sharp rise in support for the Kremlin in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, a slow erosion of support began as the costs of the war in Ukraine piled up and the Kremlin was unable to deliver any additional wins there. Between April and July 2016, support for the government crossed into negative territory and has remained there ever since; currently, the government has a 55% disapproval rating. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's support crossed into negative territory between February and May 2017, and disapproval of his performance currently stands at 63%. Even Putin's support has eroded from a high of 89% in 2015 to 62% today.¹⁴¹ Although the immediate trigger for the fall in support for Putin was the pension reform unveiled in spring 2018, the real causes are more underlying. In focus groups before the 2018 election, people told focus group leaders they approved of Putin's performance, but are tired of him "leading until he dies."

Levada Center polling also shows a rise in positive attitudes toward the U.S. and especially the EU. Animosity toward the U.S. peaked in January 2015, with 81% of Russians expressing a negative opinion and only 12% expressing positive views. In August 2019, negative views of the U.S. had fallen to 44% and positive views had risen to 42%. Russians assess the EU more positively. The worst period for Russian attitudes toward Europe was in January 2015, when 71% expressed negative views and only 20% viewed the EU positively. By August 2019, Russian views of the EU were positive in the aggregate, with 49% approving and only 34% disapproving.

In summary, polling, expert opinion, and focus

groups all show that the Kremlin is facing serious issues with public support and that much of the reason for this revolves around the perception that the Kremlin is too focused on foreign interventions as it ignores the concerns of the Russian people. The erosion of public support for Russia's policy in Ukraine, along with the scaling-back of Kremlin goals there, might open the way for a solution.

Russian public opinion polling supports the contention that support for the Kremlin is falling in Russia and that voters want the government to pay attention to them instead of embarking on foreign adventures.

Of course, the danger is that the Russian government could manufacture a crisis to renew public support. After all, before the crisis in Ukraine erupted in early 2014, Levada indicators showed a slow erosion of public support similar to the one Russia is now experiencing. The seizure of Crimea caused a significant spike in support, buying the government time. But the events of early 2014 provided enough grist for the Kremlin propaganda mill to convince many Russians that the events in Ukraine were supported by the West and threatened not only Russian-speakers in Ukraine, but Russia directly. So there was less for the Kremlin to manufacture outright. A future crisis might not be so ready-made to whip up public frenzy. If the West refuses to play its assigned role as the Kremlin's bugbear, an increasingly skeptical Russian public may refuse to believe the threats propagated by the Kremlin and media outlets friendly to it.

The final reason for optimism about a solution to the war in the Donbas is the Zelensky government in Ukraine. Zelensky, a Russian-speaking Jewish Ukrainian, represents the ideal of a broad-based, civic definition of the nation, something the country desperately needs. His government can help Ukraine shed its links with

¹⁴⁰ Remarks by various speakers, monthly lunch of Russia experts in Washington, D.C., July 26, 2019.

¹⁴¹ All figures are from *Levada Center*, "Indicators," internet resource at: <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>, accessed September 23, 2019.

Polling, expert opinion, and focus groups all show that the Kremlin is facing serious issues with public support and that much of the reason for this revolves around the perception that the Kremlin is too focused on foreign interventions as it ignores the concerns of the Russian people.



A memorial complex to the WWII at Savur-Mohyla, damaged due to fighting, Donetsk region, eastern Ukraine, 20 October 2016. (OSCE/Evgeniy Maloletka)

some of the far-right groups that have been a boon to Russian propaganda efforts. His party's control of parliament gives it a broad mandate for reform and room to pursue a solution to the conflict. But both reforms, which Ukraine desperately needs, and a solution to the war in the Donbas will be politically tricky, and will mobilize powerful opposing constituencies, so success is not assured.

Remaining Challenges

Ukraine's two most pressing internal problems are corruption and the lack of a broad-based, civic definition of the nation. As noted, Zelensky's election helps with the latter problem, but will be largely symbolic unless Ukraine can ensconce a civic definition of citizenship in law and develop norms that allow Russian-speakers and others who don't identify as ethnically Ukrainian to feel at home. Constitutionally, this already exists. The Constitution of Ukraine locates sovereignty in "the Ukrainian people – citizens of Ukraine of all nationalities" in an attempt to establish a civic definition of citizenship.¹⁴²

But the implementation of this constitutional provision has been fraught, and the tension has usually centered on language laws. A 2012 law that allowed the establishment of regional official languages in regions where national minorities exceed 10% of the population sparked fistfights in the parliament and widespread protests by Ukrainian nationalists. The current language law, adopted in July 2019, established Ukrainian as the state language, and, although it recognizes Russian as the language of a national minority, the law does not allow for the establishment of regional languages. Settling on a law that satisfies proponents of Ukrainian as well as proponents of Russian and other minority languages will be a major challenge in establishing the legal framework for an inclusive, civic definition of the Ukrainian nation.

Another challenge integral to this effort will be shedding ties with right-wing militias. Ukraine is indebted to these groups for essentially saving

the country from complete military defeat in 2014, but their continued existence is a boon to Russian propaganda and an obstacle to healing the cleavages in Ukrainian society. Military units like the Azov and Aidar Battalions, which sprang from right-wing, proto-fascist political parties, were the most effective fighting force the Ukrainian government had in the early days of the war.

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In spring 2014, local police forces in eastern Ukraine proved unable to stem the tide of takeovers of government buildings by separatists. In fact, many of them joined the separatist forces themselves. In response, right-wing groups began to form their own "battalions," which were instrumental in rolling back the separatist tide over the next several months. On May 5, 2014, the Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior registered one of these units as a volunteer battalion, and two days later, it airlifted them to Mariupol, Ukraine's largest port on the Sea of Azov. At the time, Mariupol was in danger of falling to separatist forces, which would have been a major catastrophe for Ukraine. For its successful stand in Mariupol, this unit earned significant credibility as a fighting force. It took the name "Azov Battalion" to commemorate its exploits and continues to serve in the Ukrainian armed forces today.¹⁴³

In fact, not only does the Azov Battalion continue to serve, but it also exudes a sense of superiority over many of the official Ukrainian units, which, in turn, express jealousy over Azov's superior training, equipment, and salary.¹⁴⁴ Even now, after significant improvements in the capabilities of the

¹⁴² Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 15.

¹⁴³ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 180.

¹⁴⁴ Member of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (name withheld by request), interview with the author, May 31, 2019.



Toretz Regional Administration building (Robert Hamilton)

Ukrainian armed forces, volunteer units are still routinely given the toughest assignments along the line-of-contact. On a visit there in May 2019, Ukrainian officers told me the Aidar Battalion, another volunteer unit, was assigned to the most dangerous part of their brigade's sector and had been successful in fortifying and extending the Ukrainian lines.¹⁴⁵

The problem for Ukraine is the right-wing, often fascist ideology that comes along with the military prowess of these units. Although they are critical in helping Ukraine fight the war, they are an obstacle to ending it, at least in a way that endures. Their extreme right-wing, Russophobic views, amplified by Kremlin propaganda and Russian media reporting, inspires genuine fear among citizens of the country who are not ethnic Ukrainian. As Tim Judah has noted, "Ukrainian neo-Nazism, fascism and extreme nationalism all combine to make Ukraine's Achilles' heel. Small elements of truth have painted, and allowed the Russian media and their Western fellow-travelers to paint, an utterly distorted picture of the whole."¹⁴⁶

Hopefully, the absorption of the volunteer units into the formal Ukrainian armed forces will serve to moderate their views, rather than infect the larger body with them. One OSCE monitor believes that this is starting to happen. She believes the Ukrainian military leadership has directed members of the former volunteer units to cut ties with—or at a minimum not publicly proclaim their association with—extreme right-wing groups. She says, "I can see Facebook profiles of soldiers of Azov. Last year [2018] they were posting to mark the birthday of Hitler, but this year it didn't happen."¹⁴⁷ While neglecting to congratulate Hitler on his birthday is small progress in cutting ties between these units and the far-right, it is progress nevertheless.

Ukrainian-American Natalie Jaresko, who served as Ukraine's finance minister from 2014-2016, sees a new tolerance emerging. When she served as finance minister, Russian, Ukrainian, and English were used interchangeably in her office, and she saw a trend emerging in the larger society where "the definition of being a Ukrainian is being a member of this society

¹⁴⁵ Ukrainian military officer (name withheld by request), interview with the author, May 21, 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 173.

¹⁴⁷ Member of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (name withheld by request), interview with the author, May 31, 2019.

and not being ethnically Ukrainian.”¹⁴⁸ This new tolerance, a language law that takes the interests of all groups into account, and shedding ties with far-right groups will all be crucial to building consensus around a civic—not ethnic definition—of what it means to be Ukrainian. Added to this challenge will be the challenge of comprehensively reforming and rebuilding the economy of the Donbas and integrating it into the larger Ukrainian economy. Only then will all people living inside Ukraine’s borders feel a stake in the country’s success.

Corruption in the armed forces, although much lower than it used to be, has corrosive effects on military morale and could endanger Ukraine’s security.

Ukraine’s next major internal challenge is corruption. Corruption’s effects are wide-ranging and pernicious, affecting Ukraine’s economic development, its social cohesion, and even its security. Ukraine currently ranks 120 out of 180 countries in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index.¹⁴⁹ This rank is an improvement from before the war, when it ranked 144 out of 175 countries, but Ukraine clearly still has a long way to go. Economically, Ukraine’s culture of corruption stifles FDI and domestic economic dynamism. Ukraine’s size and economic potential suggest there should be much more FDI than there is.¹⁵⁰ Corruption is a major reason for this problem. An official at the U.S. State Department, for example, said that leaders at Boeing were so stunned by the corruption of the Ukrainian defense industry and the lack of rule of law that they declined to invest, despite the fact that Ukraine has world-class aircraft and jet engine manufacturing

facilities and prowess.¹⁵¹ Tim Judah echoes the concern about the absence of rule of law in Ukraine, noting that people bribe judges to put their enemies in jail and that the person who pays the most wins when a commercial dispute goes to court.¹⁵²

The presence of regionally based networks of oligarchs stifles economic dynamism, enables corruption, and erodes national cohesion. As Andrew Wilson has noted, Ukraine is divided along religious, ethnic, and linguistic grounds, but “the most powerful division of all is regional and regionally based patronal networks.”¹⁵³ Former Deputy of the Luhansk Oblast’ Council Serhiy Shakhov says that the conflict in eastern Ukraine began as a conflict between groups of oligarchs connected to former Presidents Yushchenko and Yanukovich.¹⁵⁴ When Yushchenko won the presidency in 2005, oligarchs connected to Yanukovich understood the threat he posed to their interests and began to mobilize their economic resources and criminal networks to oppose him. When Yanukovich won the presidency in 2010, oligarchs connected to Yushchenko did the same.

Corruption in the armed forces, although much lower than it used to be, has corrosive effects on military morale and could endanger Ukraine’s security. An OSCE monitor relates an observation illustrating this point. She says she hears consistently from Ukrainian soldiers that leaders are diverting to their friends in Kyiv special pay earmarked for those units serving at the line-of-contact.¹⁵⁵ This pay is meant to compensate soldiers for the harsh conditions and persistent danger of serving on the front lines. If soldiers at the front are getting less special pay so that cronies of their commanders in the rear can get pay they don’t deserve, then the effects on morale and military effectiveness are obvious.

¹⁴⁸ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 237.

¹⁴⁹ *Corruption Perceptions Index 2018*, Transparency International, internet resource at: <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018>, accessed September 26, 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 224.

¹⁵¹ Officials at the U.S. Department of State (names withheld by request), interview with the author, July 26, 2019.

¹⁵² Judah, *In Wartime*, p. 224.

¹⁵³ Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 100.

¹⁵⁴ Serhiy Shakhov, interview with the author, April 27, 2016.

¹⁵⁵ Member of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (name withheld by request), interview with the author, May 31, 2019.

Tackling corruption is critical to ensuring that after the war in the Donbas ends, Ukraine does not remain an endemically weak state prone to civil war. A recent report from the UK Royal United Services Institute argues that Ukraine's corruption was a factor in the start of the current war. "Weak and enfeebled state institutions . . . enabled corruption, organized crime and a shadow power structure to flourish" and "acted as a barrier for civic activism and even basic loyalty, making it vulnerable to destabilization campaigns."

Recommendations

The war in the Donbas is at an inflection point. There are reasons to be optimistic that a settlement is in view. The exhaustion and frustration of people in the separatist-controlled regions, Russia's changing policy on the war—at least in part a result of rising frustration among the Russian public—and the election of a new Ukrainian government without regional ties or ties to networks of oligarchs all contribute to the possibility of a settlement. But in order for peace to endure after the war, the Ukrainian state must construct a broad-based, civic national identity, and it must tackle the country's endemic corruption.

There is no military solution to this war. The development of the Ukrainian armed forces, now much more formidable than five years ago, means that the cost to Russia of resurrecting its "Novorossiya" dreams and permanently dismembering Ukraine is probably prohibitively high. Conversely, any idea of a "Croatia scenario"—the idea that a reinvented Ukrainian army could blitz through the Donbas and end the war the way the Croatian army won its war of independence against Serbia in 1995—is irresponsible. This idea, sometimes mooted by Ukrainian military officers, would be a disaster. It would be an invitation for Russia to enter the war openly, and to perhaps permanently occupy even larger parts of Ukraine, the way it did in Georgia after the 2008 war there.

Rather than engage in daydreams of impossible

military victories, Ukraine needs to reach out to the exhausted and frustrated people of the Donbas to convince them that Kyiv can provide them the security, economic opportunity, and ability to manage their own affairs that they currently lack. This entails lifting the economic blockade, enabling the receipt of pensions, easing language laws, and forging a consensus in Ukrainian society over what federalism for the Donbas will entail.¹⁵⁶

It entails capitalizing on the 750,000-1,000,000 monthly crossings of the line of contact by making government-controlled towns close to it models for what separatist-controlled towns could be. In place like Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, which are already significantly more developed than similar towns in separatist-controlled Ukraine, the government needs to move past the largely cosmetic improvements to upgrade infrastructure and lay the foundations for long-term economic development.

One idea for tackling the question of the status of Donetsk and Luhansk provinces in Ukraine is regionalism without autonomy. Officials at the U.S. State Department note that the "special status" referenced in the Minsk II Agreement does not amount to autonomy. Instead, they believe an arrangement that gives Donetsk and Luhansk provinces language rights, enhanced local government powers, and their own police forces could work. They also note that the question of amnesty for separatist fighters must be resolved since there are tens of thousands of them who fear being imprisoned or killed if they lay down their weapons.¹⁵⁷

This regionalism-without-autonomy model still leaves open the question of Ukraine's vector of integration, a major reason for Russia's intervention in the first place. One of the main reasons Russian views on a resolution of the conflict center on a federal solution is that it would give Donetsk and Luhansk provinces an effective veto over Ukraine's NATO or EU membership. So Russia is likely to attempt to subvert any solution that fails to achieve that aim. It is worth exploring whether such a veto, but limited to a specific period of time—say ten years—might be

¹⁵⁶ International Crisis Group, *Rebels without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine*, p. 18.

¹⁵⁷ Officials at the U.S. Department of State (names withheld by request), interview with the author, July 26, 2019.

the sweetener required to secure the Kremlin's backing.

Even assuming all these hurdles are cleared and the conflict is resolved, its effects—especially those in the economic, social-psychological, and environmental areas—will take decades to repair. They will take expertise and resources that Ukraine does not have. To varying extents and for various reasons, the U.S., the EU, and Russia are all currently self-absorbed and probably disinclined to expend significant resources helping Ukraine recover from the war in the Donbas and set itself on the path of stability and development. External observers may be inclined to point to the internal cleavages in Ukrainian society and the country's rampant corruption as the causes of the war, and argue that Ukraine has to fix itself before the outside world can intervene to help. And this is true as far as it goes. But it is also true that the outside world contributed to the start of war in Ukraine by making the country the object in a geopolitical tussle between Russia and the West. Any honest accounting of the war's history must acknowledge this fact. And any fair treatment of Ukraine after the war should seek to compensate it through significant, long-term assistance in dealing with the war's consequences. This may entail expanding the size and powers of the OSCE monitoring mission to ensure it can provide genuine security for civilians in and around the conflict zone. And it will certainly entail expanded international economic and environmental assistance.

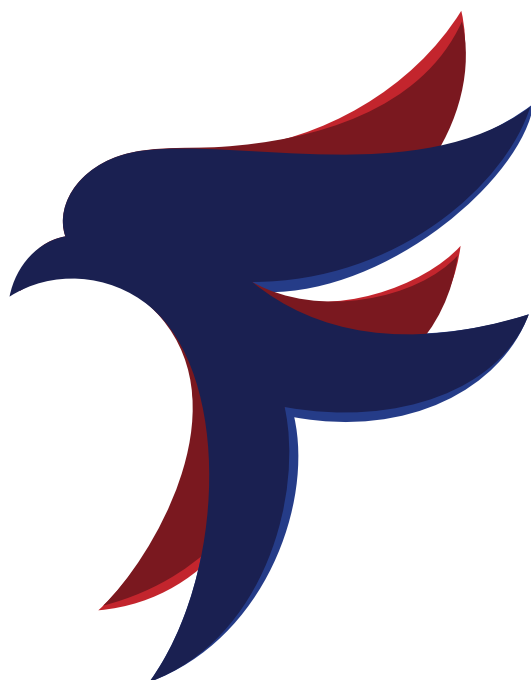
Finally, the window of opportunity to craft a durable settlement to the war will not remain open forever. The swap of prisoners between Russia and Ukraine in September 2019 is a hopeful sign, but the postponement the same month of the scheduled Normandy format summit between Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany highlights the continued challenges of making meaningful progress. The reason for the delay of the summit is a disagreement between Russia and Ukraine over the order of steps the two sides must take to end the war, known as the "Steinmeier Formula." Russia insists that settling the future status of the separatist regions and holding elections there must be the first two steps.

Ukraine insists that before these steps can occur, the sides must agree on a ceasefire and troop withdrawal, and Ukraine must regain control of the border between the separatist regions and Russia. Ukrainian President Zelensky's October 2019 agreement in principle to the "Steinmeier Formula," which Russian media and Zelensky's political opponents in Ukraine claimed was a capitulation, made clear that a troop withdrawal and return of Ukrainian control of the border must be the first two steps.¹⁵⁸

If the window of opportunity to settle the war in the Donbas closes, it is likely to remain on the list of frozen conflicts in the former Soviet Union, alongside Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflicts have been the source of decades of human misery, stunted political and economic development, and tens of thousands of combat casualties in Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Republic of Armenia, and Republic of Azerbaijan. They have also been a source of constant aggravation in the relationship between Russia and the West. Striking Ukraine from this list by ending the conflict there would not only improve the lives and futures of millions of Ukrainians, but also could provide insights into solutions for the other frozen conflicts, and diplomatic momentum toward those solutions.



¹⁵⁸ "Zelensky addresses Ukrainians, explains 'Steinmeier Formula,'" *Kyiv Post*, October 4, 2019, internet resource at: <https://kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/zelensky-addresses-ukrainians-explains-steinmeier-formula-full-transcript.html>, accessed October 11, 2019.



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