

Domestic Sources of the Donbas Insurgency

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The armed conflict in the Donbas has been widely portrayed in Western policy circles and mainstream media as a result of Russia's covert military aggression against Ukraine with little local support. On April 13, Ambassador Samantha Power, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, compared events in the region to Russia's intervention in Crimea, stating that there was "nothing grassroots-seeming about it."¹ Three former U.S. ambassadors to Ukraine, in a joint article in late April, accused the Kremlin of "running an insurgency in Ukraine's east" and suggested that an order from President Vladimir Putin would compel insurgents to lay down their arms.² Since then, Western media reports and analysis have increasingly focused on exposing Russia's ties to the insurgency. Concentrating on Russia's role in the conflict, however, overlooks the fact that the armed separatist movement emerged in direct response to the violent regime change that took place in Kyiv. It initially consisted largely of locals and had the support of at least a quarter to a third of the residents of Donbas.³

This memo views the Donbas insurrection as primarily a homegrown phenomenon. It argues that political factors—*state fragmentation, violent regime change, and the government's low coercive capacity*—combined with popular emotions specific to the region—*resentment and fear*—played a crucial role in launching the armed secessionist movement there.

¹ <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/week-transcript-ambassador-samantha-power/story?id=23293462&page=2>

² Steven Pifer, John Herbst, William Taylor, "Does Putin Want War?" *The American Interest*, April 24, 2014.

³ In a June 26 - July 2 KMIS poll, 34.8 percent of respondents in the Donetsk region said they trusted the leadership of the DNR and 26.2 percent of Luhansk region residents expressed trust in the leadership of the LNR. The estimate of the composition of the insurgency has been offered by the interim deputy head of Ukraine's presidential administration Serhiy Pashynskyi: <http://reporter.vesti.ua/61677-vy-ne-predstavljaete-kak-tjazhelo-bylo-zastavit-armiju-voevat>

Structural Feasibility

On the structural level, political instability in the capital and low state capacity—two variables associated with a higher feasibility of civil war—were clearly prominent in Ukraine’s case prior to the start of the insurrection. As political scientists James Fearon and David Laitin note, weak hybrid regimes with an unstable mix of political forces or governing arrangements substantially increase the probability of the onset of war “due to weak local policing or inept and corrupt counterinsurgency practices.”⁴ In Ukraine, regime change in late February 2014 was preceded by the gradual loss of government control over almost half of state territory as protesters seized regional state administrations. It was also accompanied by the use of violence, by both law enforcement and protest participants, which had become especially pronounced since January 19. Low-level violence quickly spread from Kyiv to other regions. The first violent clash in the Donbas between supporters and opponents of the Euromaidan occurred in the main square of Donetsk on January 21. These clashes became more intense after Viktor Yanukovich’s ouster and resulted in the first killing of a demonstrator from the nationalist *Svoboda* party in Donetsk on March 13.

Three political variables markedly increased the feasibility of war in the Donbas.

1) *Fragmented State*. Regional self-governed enclaves in western and central Ukraine that emerged in late January 2014 defied rule from Kyiv, created a sense of state fragmentation, and further accelerated in the final phase of the Euromaidan. The authorities’ failure to stop the violent seizure of government buildings and reestablish control over half of the country indicated a de facto disintegration of the state. Their continued rule in eastern and southern Ukraine rested primarily on the political dominance of the Party of Regions (PR) and limited support there for the Euromaidan. Once the regime collapsed and former opposition leaders captured power, the PR began to fall apart and a powerful centrifugal force spread to the east. This was accompanied by the diffusion of resistance tactics earlier used by Euromaidan activists and later adopted by the emergent separatist movement.

2) *Low Government Legitimacy*. Ukraine’s new post-Euromaidan authorities were widely viewed as illegitimate across the southeastern regions, but Donbas residents stood apart in the strength of their beliefs. In early April, approximately half of all respondents in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions expressed strong confidence in the illegality of the acting president and the new government, compared to about a third or fewer respondents in other southeastern regions with a similar view.⁵ This intense rejection of the new authorities could be tied to an overwhelmingly negative opinion of the

⁴ James Fearon and David Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, 1 (February 2003).

⁵ KMIS poll, April 8 – 16, 2014: <http://zn.ua/UKRAINE/mneniya-i-vzglyady-zhiteley-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-aprel-2014-143598.html>

Euromaidan. Seventy percent of residents in the Donetsk region and sixty-one percent in the Luhansk region viewed the protest movement as a Western-sponsored armed coup.⁶ The average for the rest of southeast was almost half that number (37 percent). While new Kyiv-appointed governors in Donetsk and Luhansk had dubious legitimacy, the Party of Regions with a majority in local councils also lost its authority. Only four percent in each region wanted to see its members represented in the new government. The resulting power vacuum created an opening for previously marginalized political entrepreneurs to claim a popular mandate and lead a challenge both against Kyiv and the established local elites.

3) *Coercive Failure*. The coercive capacity of the new government in the Donbas proved highly limited from the start. This was partially because the local police was staffed with Yanukovich loyalists but also because of the perceived disregard of former opposition leaders for law-enforcement bodies. During the first anti-Kyiv rallies, police chiefs in various Donbas towns promised to remain “on the side of the people.” Berkut officers returning from the Maidan were hailed as heroes and invited to speak at the rallies. Although Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU) managed to arrest several separatist leaders in Donetsk and Luhansk in March, it did not stem the popular tide. Once protesters started seizing government buildings across the region, police either fled or defected to the protesters’ side. One high-ranking defector was Aleksandr Khodakovsky, who earlier led the SBU special operations unit in Donetsk and has since become an insurgent commander of the “Vostok” battalion. The peaceful withdrawal of the Ukrainian army from Crimea similarly signaled that the Ukrainian government was not ready to fight. Ukraine’s coercive failure became further apparent when the first armored vehicles with Ukrainian soldiers appeared in the Donbas in mid-April as part of the government’s “counterterrorism operation.” Surrounded by locals, the soldiers surrendered their vehicles or retreated back to their bases. This first encounter between the government and newly-organized rebel forces showed that local support could tilt the power balance in the latter’s favor even though they remained outmanned and outgunned.

Group Emotions

While structural theories may point to variables that create an opportunity for armed resistance, they do not specify the exact mechanisms that push people to fight. As political scientist Roger Petersen notes, “structural change produces information that is processed into beliefs that in turn create emotions and tendencies toward certain actions.”⁷ He suggests three instrumental emotions—fear, resentment, and hatred—that help to explain the beginning of ethnic conflicts. Hatred requires a prior history of conflict and long-standing animosity between ethnic groups, which has not been

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Roger Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 22.

pronounced in Ukraine. Resentment and fear, by contrast, bear direct relevance to the Donbas conflict.

Resentment emerges out of a perception that one's group has been unfairly subordinated and would remain in a politically inferior status unless force is used. In the Donbas, this emotion was linked to the region's regional identity as an industrial stronghold "feeding" the rest of Ukraine and to its predominantly Russian-speaking culture. The peculiar Donbas identity has been rooted in its historic status as a "frontier land" that traditionally resisted the metropolitan attempts at domination either by Moscow or Kyiv.⁸ This identity solidified during Ukraine's independence with 69.5 percent of Donetsk respondents identifying themselves primarily with their own region.⁹ The region's economic weight relative to other regions gave it a sense of political entitlement to power, or at least to having a say in Ukrainian politics. Its Russian-speaking milieu, with a heavy presence of ethnic Russians, made the Donbas, along with Crimea, particularly responsive to pro-Russian emotive appeals.¹⁰ Almost a ten-year rule of Yanukovich and the Party of Regions allowed Donbas residents to feel both politically influential and protected from discrimination on cultural or ethnic grounds. Its abrupt end accompanied by the party's disintegration and prosecution of some of its members meant a sudden reversal of their politically-privileged status. At the same time, the parliament's vote to revoke a language law allowing Russian to be a regional language, combined with threats to turn off Russian media, signaled a new risk of cultural discrimination. On top of this, the subsequent spread of dehumanizing terms in reference to pro-Russian activists meant that secession was not only a path to protect one's status but also one's human dignity.

Resentment-based emotion in Donbas was further amplified by the rise of fear. *Fear* spreads in situations of state collapse when institutions and rules safeguarding a certain group become non-functional. The resulting violence is then viewed as a form of self-defense. In the Donbas, fear was a direct response to the growing prominence of nationalist paramilitary groups, like the Right Sector, which spearheaded violent clashes with the police and seized public buildings. Ukrainian nationalists were commonly regarded as "fascists" in the Donbas during World War II, and locals still viewed them with great antipathy.¹¹ The first "self-defense" units to protect the Donbas from "neo-

⁸ Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s - 1990s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 337.

⁹ Yaroslav Hrytsak, "Istoria dvoh mist: Lviv i Donetsk u porivnialniy perspektyvi," *Ukraina Moderna*, 2007, 49.

¹⁰ In the 2001 census approximately 38 percent of Donbas residents identified themselves as ethnic Russians; in a July 2012 survey 82 percent named Russian as their native language and 23 percent reported difficulties with understanding formal Ukrainian-language paperwork, which was a higher proportion than in any other region: http://ratinggroup.com.ua/upload/files/RG_Movne_pytannia_072012.pdf

¹¹ Kuromiya, 279; in a 2004 poll, 42.7 percent of respondents in Donetsk identified "Ukrainian nationalists" as a group they had the most negative opinion of and the least in common with: *Ukraina Moderna*, 2007: http://uamoderna.com/images/archiv/12_2/1_UM_12_2_Zmist.pdf; only 2.2 percent of Donbas

Nazi” threats emerged even before Yanukovich’s ouster, in early February, and multiplied after he fled. Expressions of fear in reference to Ukrainian nationalist groups have been common for pro-Russian rally participants across the Donbas.¹² Early reports of lawlessness from western Ukraine, where Right Sector activists harassed local public officials, probably served to reinforce this emotion. In early April, 46 percent in the Donetsk region and 33 percent in the Luhansk region viewed disarming illegal radical groups as the main step in maintaining the country’s unity. Instead, the government authorized transforming them into semi-private militia battalions tasked with fighting separatists in the east. This made the desire for protection more salient and led locals to support or join their own town militias.¹³

Elite Strategies

Theories of elite-led violence point to the decisive role of political leaders in: 1) setting the discursive logic of the conflict; 2) providing financial and organizational resources; and 3) coordinating initial violent actions to mobilize more members of the group. The significance of leaders in launching a separatist insurrection in the Donbas, however, remains dubious.

At first, pro-Russian demonstrations in the region lacked an identifiable leader or a coherent organizational structure. The two self-proclaimed people’s governors—Pavel Gubarev in Donetsk and Aleksandr Kharitonov in Luhansk—had a history of activism in local politics, but they were largely unknown figures region-wide. After the SBU locked both of them up by mid-March, they played no role in transforming political protest into a militarized secessionist movement. The first leader with a military background—Valeriy Bolotov—emerged in early April and claimed power after seizing the SBU building in Luhansk. However, he played no prominent role in the rallies preceding the building seizures and capitalized on public mobilization instead of spurring it.

When it comes to messaging, the speakers at the anti-Kyiv rallies utilized old and familiar narratives. Yanukovich and the Party of Regions have framed their political opponents as “fascists” since the 2004 presidential election. The PR similarly used war-related symbols, like the St. George’s ribbon that became an insurgent emblem, as identity markers setting the anti-fascist Donbas apart from nationalist western Ukraine. Finally, calls for federalism and the enhanced status of the Russian language have been voiced since the 1990s. The first regional referendum on Ukraine’s federal structure was

respondents had a positive view of Stepan Bandera compared to 21.6 percent in the rest of Ukraine, KMIS and Ivan Katchanovski, May 2014.

¹² Interview with *Global Post* journalist Danylo Peleshchuk, July 26, 2014.

¹³ See the exchange on the barricades between Slaviansk’s self-proclaimed mayor Viacheslav Ponomarev and locals on the threat of a nationalist incursion into town, April 13, 2014:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDhEPpsFX7I>

held in the Donbas in March 1994 with large majorities in the two regions supporting a federal system and Russian as a second state language. Another attempt to hold a referendum on similar questions occurred during the Orange Revolution when the Donetsk regional council initially approved but later cancelled the decision. Pro-Russian rallies in March-April 2014 thus relied on ideological scripts, imagery, and slogans that had been exploited for at least a decade.

One relatively unknown symbol that emerged during the protests was a black-blue-and-red flag, which alluded to the Donbas' only historical experiment with statehood in 1918. However, it has also been long popular in local pro-Russian activist circles. This flag was a staple of the "Donetsk Republic" non-governmental organization that was created in 2005 and later banned as a separatist organization. One of its founders, Andrei Purgin, was active in organizing the first anti-Maidan rallies in February, but he remained peripheral to the development of the movement.

None of the groups involved in staging the rallies—Russian Bloc, Donetsk Army Volunteers, Lugansk Guard, etc.—had serious organizational or financial resources to fund the movement. At the same time, there has never been any conclusive evidence proving that the movement was funded by wealthy PR leaders such as Yanukovich or Rinat Akhmetov. In fact, appeals to lay down arms and end secessionist attempts by some of the region's most authoritative figures, such as Akhmetov, Boris Kolesnikov, and Aleksandr Lukianchenko, played seemingly no role in de-escalating the violence.¹⁴ The Akhmetov-funded regional television channel Donbas TV portrayed the insurgency in a negative light and advocated for Ukraine's unity. Most importantly, the regional political elite, including members of regional councils and city councils, largely refused to support the separatist movement despite demonstrators' attempts to gain their endorsement. As a result, new regional self-declared councils included mainly random people chosen from among the demonstrators.

Finally, the spread of violent seizures of government buildings across the Donbas in April happened sporadically and in a decentralized manner. The self-declared "people's mayors" of different Donbas towns were local political opportunists who used the implosion of authority to claim power rather than members of a clandestine organization coordinated from a single center. Paramilitary commanders who propped them up were often in conflict regarding their respective spheres of influence. In addition, separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics followed different strategies that were adopted in an ad hoc manner—the former rushed to declare its independence in early April while the latter decided to announce its separation from Ukraine only after the referendum. A more centralized coordination of armed resistance

¹⁴ Gubarev claims Akhmetov even tried to bribe some of the separatist activists to put secessionist movement in check, but failed. Interview with Pavel Gubarev, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, May 12, 2014: <http://www.rg.ru/2014/05/12/gubarev.html>

in the Donetsk region appeared only in late May when Aleksandr Borodai's group and the Vostok battalion imposed their authority on disparate separatist groups in Donetsk.

Conclusion: Key Domestic Drivers

The armed conflict in Donbas resulted from a complex interplay of structural and agency-based variables. Monocausal explanations pointing to Russia as the sole culprit miss crucial domestic drivers of the insurrection. They include structural variables linked to the state and regime dynamics and popular emotions based on resentment and fear. Without domestic conditions favoring an armed secessionist movement, external prodding would have failed to produce a sustained and large-scale insurgency. Those who came to lead it merely capitalized on public apprehension about the growing anarchy in Kyiv and resorted to long-established narratives to keep it in motion. This does not absolve the insurgents, together with the Ukrainian and Russian governments, of responsibility for the subsequent calamities of war. Still, as this analysis suggests, merely suppressing the insurgency by force without addressing its deeper internal causes is unlikely to make the Donbas a less troublesome and volatile part of Ukraine.