

## How to Make Sense of the Donbas in the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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The war Russia unleashed against Ukraine in the spring of 2014, which continues to this day, has brought the Donbas in Ukraine to the attention of the entire world. The ongoing war is being fought almost entirely in the Donbas, an industrial centre of coal and steel, and the fortress of allegedly pro-Russian separatists, producing thousands of casualties, both military and civilian. Unlike Crimea, the Donbas, or the Donetsk Basin, has never been a household name in any country outside the former Soviet Union. The fact that little is known about the Donbas and its past makes it difficult for outsiders to comprehend the present situation, let alone to place it within the wider historical context of Ukraine and Russia. To make matters worse, Moscow's overwhelming propaganda machine has capitalized on this ignorance to distort the historical and political background of the present war in the Donbas.

This essay addresses the issue of the historical identities of the Donbas and seeks to provide a framework to understand the present war in the Donbas.

### **What is the Donbas?**

Much of the Donbas belongs to what was historically known as “New Russia” (*Новороссия*). It came into being when Catherine II conquered the northern coastal areas of the Black Sea (including Crimea), until then under the Ottoman Empire, and incorporated them into the Russian Empire. When President Vladimir Putin annexed Crimea and staged a war in Southern and Eastern Ukraine, predominantly Russian-speaking regions, he resurrected the term “New Russia” – “This [region] is New Russia, to use the terminology of Tsarist Russia. Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolaev and Odessa were not part of Ukraine during Tsarist times. They were given [to Ukraine] by the Soviet government in the 1920s. Why did it do this? God knows.”<sup>1</sup> Putin's grasp of Russian history is inadequate at best. First of all, Tsarist Russia did not recognize a geographic and administrative entity called Ukraine. Moreover, neither Kharkiv nor Luhansk was a constituent part of “New Russia.” They were incorporated into the Empire before the Catherinian era. Neither did the Bolsheviks give this region (which includes the Donbas) to Ukraine.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in <http://www.segodnya.ua/politics/pnews/putin-harkov-lugansk-doneck-herson-nikolaev-odessa-ne-vhodili-v-sostav-ukrainy-513722.html>.

In January 1918, Ukraine declared independence, claimed this region as an integral part of the new independent country and fought against the Bolsheviks to remain independent of Russia's aggression, thus inaugurating three years of a complex war. It is true that in 1918, in disapproval of the newly independent Ukrainian government with Kyiv as its capital, communists in eastern Ukraine separated their land and the surrounding industrial regions into the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic. However, Communist Party leader, Vladimir Lenin, took issue. Seeing the Republic as weakening Ukraine by depriving the latter of a "proletarian base" and hoping to establish a Soviet Ukraine loyal to Moscow, Lenin disapproved of the Republic and the separation of this region from Ukraine. Lenin thus acknowledged the Donbas to be part of Ukraine. This is a far cry from Putin's claim that New Russia was handed over by the Soviet government in the 1920s. Lenin's judgment was based on the fact that however Russified culturally and linguistically the Donbas and the eastern region of Ukraine may have become, ethnic Russians had never accounted for a majority (except in Crimea), nor do they today. The Donbas was and is predominantly Ukrainian.

In a historical sense, one can safely contend that the Donbas was and continues to be a supremely Ukrainian land. Modern Ukrainian national ideology is overwhelmingly "populist," as much of it is based on the idealization of the Cossacks and the movement's rebellious, populist, and democratic nature. (This conception of Ukraine also applies to Galicia which was not really affected by the Cossack movement.) The most famous Ukrainian historian and statesman Mikhaylo Hrushevs'kyi [Міхайло Грушевський] is a case in point. He favoured the free and autonomous existence of the common people over the construction of a powerful, centralised state, like the Russian autocracy. It is not that Ukraine did not produce political thinkers who emphasised "state-building" in Ukraine (the conservative V'iacheslav Lypyns'kyi [В'ячеслав Липинський], for example, who joined the Skoropads'kyi government, that in April 1918, overthrew the government of independent Ukraine headed by Hrushevs'kyi). Yet, characteristically, in today's Ukraine, Hrushevsky is far more strongly admired than Lypyns'kyi. At any rate, the historical weakness (or de-emphasis) of state-building in Ukraine contrasts sharply with the almighty state of Russia. Russia never really understood Ukraine. In Russia, "state" appears to pre-exist "society." Liberal Russian politician, Piotr Struve (Пётр Струве), simply could not imagine a Ukraine separate from Russia. Another liberal Russian politician and historian, Pavel Miliukov (Павел Миллюков), felt similarly. In his case, in exile in the 1930s, he came to accept Stalin as the defender of Russia's state interests and the unity of "Russia" (which in his view included Ukraine, as well).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Jens Petter Nielsen's excellent book, Миллюков и Сталин. О политической эволюции Миллюкова в эмиграции (1918-1943) (Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, Slavisk-Baltisk Institutt, 1983).

However antithetical it may appear at first glance, the Donbas embodied and still embodies the conception of a modern Ukraine. How can this be? Is the Donbas not the most anti-democratic and least inclined to Ukrainian nationhood of all the regions of today's Ukraine?

The Donbas belongs to the historical borderland called the “wild field” (дике поле), where three empires (Polish-Lithuanian, Muscovite-Russian, and Ottoman) competed for dominance, and where the Cossacks took advantage of this competition to thrive. The Donbas grew as part of the Ukrainian Cossack land on the “free steppe.” Like the Ukrainian Cossacks, the Donbas has always been militant and the political militancy of this Ukrainian-Russian borderland has long frightened many politicians. As a Russian writer who once worked in the Donbas sang:

“Neither Ukraine nor Rus’ (Не Украина и не Русь)

I fear you, the Donbas, I fear you (боюсь, Донбасс, тебя боюсь).”<sup>3</sup>

The intractableness of politics in the region has long been symbolised by the coal dust-blackened faces of the Donbas workers. In 1917–1921, the years of revolutionary upheaval and ensuing civil war, the Donbas changed hands many times. None of the political parties and regimes involved (communists, anti-communist Whites, Ukrainian nationalists of various kinds) ever gained traction there. Lev Trotsky, who briefly worked in the Donbas during the civil war, once said of the Donbas, “One can’t go to the Donbas without a [political] gas mask [В Донбасс нельзя приезжать без противогаза].”<sup>4</sup> Just like the old Ukrainian Cossacks, the Donbas allied with any one of the competing political forces against the others. For this reason, just like the Cossacks, the Donbas appeared to the imperial powers as unprincipled and opportunistic.

In fact, like the Cossacks, the Donbas as a region, was a very principled actor in its defence of freedom from interference by outside powers. When the Donbas was wholly incorporated into Muscovy/Russia in the eighteenth century, the wild field, with the closing of the frontier, was finally “tamed.” Yet, soon after, the Donbas re-emerged as a symbolic frontier region: the industrialisation in the second half of the nineteenth century in the Russian Empire, transformed this region into a coal and steel industrial hub, attracting labour from everywhere in the Empire. The “old” wild field became “wild” once again, and the free steppe regained its reputation, attracting all kinds of fortune hunters, criminals, and those who fled political, economic, and religious persecution. The Donbas meant freedom – vast opportunities for escaping poverty and exploitation. To use Albert Hirschman’s terminology, the Donbas functioned as an “exit.”<sup>5</sup> This did not necessarily mean that workers were

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Донбасс, 1993, no. 8, с. 235.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in XI з’їзд Комуністичної партії (більшовиків) України, 5–15 червня 1930 р. Стен. звіт (Харків, 1930), с. 373.

<sup>5</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 107.

not exploited by their superiors: they were – in the Donbas, as elsewhere. Moreover, unlike most other industrial regions of the Empire – where a semblance of modern industrial relations such as collective bargaining between labour and management emerged eventually – the Donbas never managed to develop such formalities. Exploitation often took wild forms. The Donbas thus symbolised “wild exploitation” (*дика експлоатація*), as much as freedom. However unformulated the political sentiments of the Donbas may have been, they can best be interpreted as directed against external interference and for the defence of their freedom.<sup>6</sup>

Even during the Communist era, the Donbas remained Moscow’s problem child. As before the revolution, it continued to be a magnet for refugees and fugitives because of its constant need for people willing to engage in hard and dangerous labour. Whoever had reason to flee, fled there and found refuge under ground, both literally and figuratively. The Donbas remained a land of refuge and freedom. After the Second World War, Ukrainian partisans, fighting a losing war against the Soviet military forces and unable to escape to the West, were advised to go to the Donbas and hide there.<sup>7</sup> At the time of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign in Stalin’s last years, the Donbas attracted Jews who saw the Donbas as freer than elsewhere. Like Siberia, however, the Donbas was also a penal colony. The gruelling heavy labour characteristic of industrial regions made it a convenient dumping ground for undesirable political individuals and groups. In the wake of the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939, and the re-incorporation of Eastern Galicia into the Soviet Union in 1945, Moscow sent masses of undesirable people to hard labour in the Donbas. Thus, the Donbas, like the Gulag, became a place where illicit political ideas spread widely.

The Donbas was also a democratising place. During the Second World War, under German occupation, Ukrainian nationalists sympathetic to the fascist ideas of Benito Mussolini or Francisco Franco, trekked from the western regions eastwards, to the Donbas, intent on capturing the hearts and minds of its population. They were rejected by the local people, and some even crossed over and ended up supporting a democratic Ukraine – that is Ukraine for everyone living in Ukraine, without discrimination against its ethnic minorities. One such Ukrainian nationalist remained grateful all his life to the Donbas for his democratic conversion.<sup>8</sup> Later, during the Brezhnev era, before the Solidarity movement in Poland, the Donbas became a very important centre for the independent (non-Soviet) trade union movement (Vladimir Klevanov [Владимир Клеванов] was one of its leaders). The Donbas also pro-

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<sup>6</sup> I have detailed this in my *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870–1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> See John A. Armstrong, *Ukrainian Nationalism*, 3rd. ed. Englewood: Westview, 1990, p. 221.

<sup>8</sup> See Євген Стахів, *Крізь тюрми, підпілля й кордони. Повість мого життя*. Київ: Рада, 1995, с. 133-134, 308.

duced a number of important Soviet freedom fighters, a fact often ignored by commentators on the Donbas.<sup>9</sup> The Ukrainian poet, Vasyl' Stus (Василь Стус), was one of them (there are other notables: Ivan Svitlychnyi [Іван Світличний], Nadiia Svitlychna [Надія Світлична], and Petro Hryhorenko [Петро Григоренко]). Stus died in a Russian labour camp in 1985. His commemorative plaque, installed in 2001 at the Donetsk State University, was recently removed by anti-Ukrainian forces.

Even after Ukraine's independence in 1991, the Donbas continued to exert democratic influence on narrowly-minded Ukrainian nationalists. Oleksii Chupa [Олексій Чупа], a factory worker from Makiivka [Макіївка] near Donetsk, who writes fiction on the side, has written a very revealing story in Ukrainian featuring a man ("Slavko" [Славко]) from Galicia. His story is illustrative of the Donbas, disinterest with regard to political agitators from outside. According to the story, in the early 1990s, Slavko ostensibly moves to Makiivka to work at a metallurgical factory, but in fact goes to the Donbas to convert people to the Ukrainian cause. There, he falls deeply in love with the Donbas, and comes to believe that in this region the remnants of Communism are dying off faster than anywhere else in Ukraine. Working and living with his co-workers, he becomes acquainted with their troubles. Gradually, Slavko comes to realise that they (ethnic Ukrainians, Russians, Georgians, Germans, Greeks) simply do not think of themselves in ethnic terms and that there is no sense in appealing to their ethnic roots. People in the Donbas ruined their lives and health by working and living under terrible conditions, leaving no energy or time, or even the basic conditions necessary for reading or going to church. They were not respected for this reason, and the government paid attention to them only just before elections took place. Slavko comes to understand that what is respected in the Donbas is not "reason, experience, education, cunning," to which he is accustomed in Galicia, but "blunt force and decisiveness" (*Тут у шані були не розум, досвід, освіченість і хитрість, до яких я звик там, у себе, а груба фізична сила та рішучість*). Slavko reaches the conclusion that the Donbas can be "Ukrainianized" only when the living and working conditions are improved, so as not to resemble torture [катування].<sup>10</sup> Chupa's story goes far in explaining why the Donbas has never trusted any political groups, be they Ukrainian, Russian, liberal or communist.

### War in the Donbas

This inherent distrust of all political powers makes it extremely difficult for outsiders to understand the politics of the Donbas, which appears to maintain allegiance to no one. However, in 1991, the population of the Donbas as a whole did take an

<sup>9</sup> Note the point made by Kateryna Iakovlenko [Катерина Яковленко]: "Czas zrozumieć Donbas," <http://eastwestinfo.eu/kultura/spoleczenstwo/item/325-czas-zrozumiec-donbas> (27 February 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Олексій Чупа, *Бомжі Донбасу. Номо Profugos*. Київ: Дискурс, 2014, с. 21, 26-29. Although Slavko may be fictional, Chupa is likely to have modeled him on a person or persons he actually knew.

unprecedented political stand. As is well known, but often unmentioned by those intent on portraying the Donbas as a pro-Russian fortress, more than three quarters of the Donbas population took part in a national referendum, the overwhelming majority (more than 83%) of whom supported the independence of Ukraine, believing that they would be better off without Moscow. An independent Ukraine subsequently proved more disappointing than satisfying, both in economic and political terms. Therefore, the political mood of the Donbas since 1991, has swung wildly left and right. At some point, many considered the independence of Ukraine some kind of historic mistake.

Despite widespread anger in the Donbas directed at the government in Kyiv, the fact is that the population of the Donbas did accept their allegiance to Ukraine. Pro-Russian political organizations formed here and there, but all of them have remained marginal and none acquired any political significance until Russia's covert military intervention in the spring of 2014. Proof of the population's acceptance of their place in Ukraine was the election of Viktor Yanukovich [Віктор Янукович] as President of Ukraine in 2010. His 2004-2005 bid failed because of election fraud (the Orange Revolution). Yanukovich, a man with a criminal history, whose main political base lay in his native Donbas, persisted, and five years later he captured the metropolis of the Ukrainian state. This event signified a remarkable turnabout in the history of politics in the Donbas, which until then had always been directed against outside powers. Clearly the people of the Donbas – the elite and the general public alike – thought of their future, however grudgingly, within the framework of an independent Ukraine. The younger generation who grew up after Ukrainian independence learned to speak Ukrainian fluently even in the Donbas. Of course, the support of Yanukovich by the people of Donbas was not unqualified – they knew that Yanukovich was not a miner, but a “thief from Ienakiieve (Єнакієве)” and his gang were “bandits”, but they were “our bandits,” and not Kyivan or Galician bandits.<sup>11</sup>

The problem was that different visions for the future competed fiercely amongst themselves. Even Yanukovich's government was not always united in its vision for the future. However beholden it may have been to Russia's (Putin's) covert support for its electoral victory, the Yanukovich cabinet never completely forsook the European option, pursuing alternative courses of action to extract maximal concessions from Moscow. It is difficult to know, of course, whether Yanukovich entertained the idea of Ukraine's European integration sincerely or whether it was a charade to disguise a hidden pro-Russian agenda. Whatever the case, Yanukovich clearly could not ignore the “European orientation” of Ukraine (as opposed to the Russian or

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<sup>11</sup> See Marta Studenna-Skrucka, *Ukraiński Donbas. Oblicza tożsamości regionalnej*, Poznań: Nauka i Innowacje, 2014, s. 284–85, and Игорь Тодоров, “Факторы украинско-российской войны в Донбассе: внутреннее измерение,” *Nowy Prometheus*, No. 7 (April 2015), p. 17.

“Eurasian orientation”). It was the Yanukovych government’s decision, in November 2013, not to sign an association treaty with the European Union that led to the “Revolution of Dignity” (or “Euromaidan”), featuring massive protests which resulted in bloodshed and the ouster of the Yanukovych government in February 2014. The Revolution was followed by Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March, and ultimately the outbreak of war in the Donbas in April. Yanukovych’s decision meant a rejection of the idea of “Europe” – a rejection in the eyes of many Ukrainians of freedom, democracy, prosperity, and genuine independence from Russia.

The Donbas reaction to Euromaidan (the struggle for European integration in Kyiv’s Independence Square [Майдан Незалежності]) was typically conflicted: both pro-Maidan and anti-Maidan movements coexisted in the Donbas, much as in other southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. Nevertheless, no clear evidence exists that anti-Maidan (pro-Yanukovych) forces dominated the Donbas as a whole. In fact, Euromaidan had some support in the Donbas. In an opinion poll conducted in March 2014 – that is after Yanukovych’s flight from Kyiv – only 26% of those in the eastern regions of Ukraine (Kharkov, Luhansk, Donetsk, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts) considered the overthrow of Yanukovych a *coup d’etat*, and at least as many people regarded it to be a conflict among Ukrainian politicians. True, only 22% of those in the eastern regions were in favour of joining the European Union, while 55% were against Ukraine’s joining the Union. As many as 72% of those in the eastern regions reckoned that the country was moving in the wrong direction.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, there are no separate figures for the Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts). Nevertheless, in the critical issue of Ukraine’s independence, the position of the Donbas population was clear: in an opinion poll conducted on 21–25 February 2014 (that is immediately after the bloodshed in the Independent Square and the flight of Yanukovych from Kyiv), 72.2% of those in the four eastern regions of Ukraine supported the position that, “Ukraine and Russia must be independent, but friendly states – with open borders, without visas and customs houses.” Only 12% of respondents in Ukraine supported the idea of the integration of Ukraine with Russia into a single state, and the corresponding figures for Crimea, the Donetsk oblast, and Luhansk oblasts are 41%, 33%, and 24%, respectively.<sup>13</sup> In March 2014, 58% of residents polled in the city of Donetsk considered themselves citizens or residents of Ukraine, and only one-third oriented themselves towards Russia.<sup>14</sup>

More remarkably, the following month, the support for the idea that “Ukraine and Russia must be independent, but friendly states – with open borders, without

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<sup>12</sup> See “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Ukraine March 14–26, 2014,” pp. 12, 80, and 106, available at <http://www.iri.org>.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=236&page=1>.

<sup>14</sup> Тодоров, “Факторы украинско-российской войны в Донбассе,” pp. 15–16.

visas and customs houses” appeared to increase: 79.7% and 72.7% in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, respectively. While approximately three quarters of those respondents in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts rejected the new, temporary government headed by Oleksandr Turchynov [Олександр Турчинов] and Arsenii Yatseniuk [Арсеній Яценюк] as “illegitimate”, more than 50 % of them also rejected Yanukovych as the legitimate president of Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> In a poll taken in the same month, after Russia’s covert military takeover of Crimea, and just as armed conflict was beginning to develop in the Donbas, 67% of the four eastern regions answered “No” to the question: “Do you support the decision of the Russian Federation to send its army into Ukraine under the pretext of protecting Russian-speaking citizens?”. Only 19% answered “Yes”<sup>16</sup>. The following month, in May 2014, a telephone poll taken by a London-based organization showed that 37% of people in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv oblasts favored “an alliance with Russia”, 14 % “an alliance with the European Union”, and almost half (49 %) said “Ukraine would be better off if it did not ally with either”<sup>17</sup>. Even in the Donbas, pro-Russian sentiments were weaker than pro-Ukrainian ones.

If so, one must ask why war broke out in the Donbas, and, subsequently, why a significant part of the Donbas came to be occupied by anti-Ukrainian forces (separatists and Russian military units). How was it possible that in the Donbas, the separatists, backed by Russian forces, managed to create and maintain the “Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR)” and the “Luhansk People’s Republic” (LNR)? Was it some kind of historical accident?

Although it is too early to know for sure, it may well have been just that – an accident. Accidents do play an important role in many historical events. In planning its takeover of eastern and southern Ukraine, Kremlin advisers, for instance, did not seem to place much confidence in the Donbas, and may have been surprised by their own success.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, there are some possible reasons why the Donbas became the centre of the separatist movement. The Donbas has always been a place of freedom, where anyone could come and find a new life. In recent years, however, this characteristic of the Donbas has faded with the general decline of the Donbas as a labour force magnet. Nevertheless, the Donbas has managed to retain much of its historical character, attracting all kinds of people – Russian nationalists of all stripes, political adventurists, extremists (such as Neo-Nazis, neo-Stalinists, and ultra-Orthodox believers)

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<sup>15</sup> See [http://zn.ua/Ukraine/mneniya-i-vzglyady-zhiteley-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-aprel-2014-143598\\_.html](http://zn.ua/Ukraine/mneniya-i-vzglyady-zhiteley-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-aprel-2014-143598_.html).

<sup>16</sup> See “Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine April 3-12, 2014,” p. 5, available at <http://www.iri.org>.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/12/world/europe/ukraine-cnn-poll/>.

<sup>18</sup> See the leaked document submitted to the Kremlin between 4 and 12 February 2014: “Представляется правильным инициировать присоединение восточных областей Украины к России,” Новая газета, 25 февраля 2015 (<http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/67389.html>).



disgruntled veterans of the Afghan and Chechen Wars, other recent armed conflicts in the former Soviet Union republics, as well as political and military “riff-raff” and criminals. The Russian secret service has also found fertile ground for recruitment in this region, nourishing pro-Russian separatists. Some separatists consequently formed underground links among themselves, involving some journalists, ultra-Orthodox activists, and small-time businessmen. Russian scholar, Nikolai Mitrokhin, called this phenomenon Russia’s “transnational preparation for separatism,” which in 2014, grew into a “transnational provocation.”<sup>19</sup> The actual number of hard core separatist activists was not very large. In the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, there were only a few dozen.<sup>20</sup> Little is known of these men “without a biography.”<sup>21</sup>

These hardcore local separatists were subsequently joined by fighters (“volunteers” and soldiers) from Russia, as well as Russian security service officers (GRU and FSB), disguised as local separatists (the war in the Donbas thus came to be called a “hybrid war”; a war of camouflage or *маскировка*). Mitrokhin reckons that initially these people from Russia numbered from several hundred to somewhat more than a thousand.<sup>22</sup> The number of soldiers from Russia soon ballooned into many thousands, and possibly tens of thousands.<sup>23</sup> The war in the Donbas was provoked and imposed by Moscow on a region uninterested in a military solution for its grievances.

### **The Future of the Donbas**

The war in the Donbas thus appeared to many residents as impossible, and even absurd. They could not perceive the hidden hand of Moscow. They could not understand why, all of a sudden, their region was plunged into war between “separatists” and the Ukrainian military forces.

This is not to say that the Russian provocation did not meet with a certain support among Donbas residents. It did. However, separatism (absorption of the Donbas into Russia or independence from Ukraine) had not been considered to be a realistic option in the Donbas before the Russian military provocation. The vast majority of the population thought of their future within the framework of an independent Ukraine. Moscow’s military interference changed the rules of the game completely. It opened a whole can of worms in the Donbas, as elsewhere in Ukraine’s southern

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<sup>19</sup> Nikolay Mitrokhin, “Transnationale Provokation. Russische Nationalisten und Geheimdienste in der Ukraine,” *Osteuropa*, 64: 5-6 (2014), pp. 161–63.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>21</sup> Nikolay Mitrokhin, “Bandenkrieg und Staatsbildung. Zur Zukunft des Donbass,” *Osteuropa*, 65: 1-2 (2015), p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> Mitrokhin, “Transnationale Provokation,” p. 170.

<sup>23</sup> Nikolay Mitrokhin, “Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion. Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine,” *Osteuropa*, 64:8 (2014), p. 15 reckons 3,000-4,000. Mitrokhin may underestimate the number. On the same page, he mentions the deaths of “hundreds of soldiers from Russia,” a casualty rate which seems too high for 3,000-4,000 soldiers.

and eastern regions, creating political alternatives that had not existed before. Those disgruntled with Kyiv now began to think differently. According to one account, most high officials of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) in the Donetsk oblast had been recruited by Russia.<sup>24</sup> Some people in the Donbas started taking up arms against Kyiv. No one knows for sure how many local fighters are involved in the war. Even if they number 40,000-45,000 (the upper limits by various estimates), they are a tiny minority, less than 1% of the Donbas population (over six million before the war). And, in point of fact, many of these separatist fighters came to the Donbas from elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> There are at least two and a half million people still remaining in the Donbas territory occupied by Russians and separatists.

Without Moscow's military intervention, the Donbas people and, more generally, the Ukrainian people, would have sought to resolve their contentious issues without resorting to arms. It is patently wrong and extremely short-sighted to claim that the Donbas population is pro-Russian. There are people today who may consider Russia to be more promising than Ukraine, but tomorrow they will think otherwise. In spite of strident political rhetoric, Russian-Ukrainian ethnic and linguistic issues have never played, and do not play, any major role in Donbas politics. In many respects, the people of the Donbas still behave like the Ukrainian Cossacks of yore, who originally formed in the "wild field" of the Muscovite-Polish-Ottoman borderlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where they sought to find freedom and fortune. Depending on the changing political climate, they would ally with whatever power could safeguard their existence and well-being. Indeed, historically, their pragmatic, temporary alliance with the Czar of Muscovy against Poland in the mid-seventeenth century resulted in the Donbas and its surrounding regions falling into the hands of Moscow. Bohdan Khmelnytsky (БОГДАН ХМЕЛЬНИЦЬКИЙ) is thus both a hero and a villain for Ukrainian nationalists – a hero because he fought against Polish domination, but a villain because he allegedly betrayed Ukraine to Muscovy.

In a sense, the war in the Donbas has helped the population of Ukraine to unite against an aggressor to a considerable degree. As Tatiana Zhurzhenko has written, "with the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in the East, the era of post-Soviet ambiguity and tolerance of blurred identities and multiple loyalties has ended."<sup>26</sup> The prominent Ukrainian intellectual, Mykola Riabchuk (Микола Рябчук), supports Zhurzhenko's views.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Годоров, "Факторы украинно-российской войны," pp. 17–18.

<sup>25</sup> Mitrokhin, "Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion," p. 12 reckons that in August 2014, of 20,000 to 25,000 fighters only 40-50% were from the Donbas.

<sup>26</sup> Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "From Boderlands to Bloodlands," <http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2014-09-19-zhurzhenko-en.pdf>, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> See Mykola Riabchuk, "Two Ukraines' Reconsidered: The End of Ukrainian Ambivalence?" *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 15:1 (2015), pp. 138-155.

However, completely missing from this argument is a discussion of the occupied territory of the Donbas (including the capitals of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts) where at least two and half million people still live. Numerous polls conducted recently in Ukraine do not include these people. Zhurzhenko correctly notes that the borderlands of the Donbas have once again turned into “bloodlands.” Riabchuk writes that in July 2014, in the middle of an ongoing war, 84% of Ukrainians and 69% of the people in the Donbas declared themselves “patriots of Ukraine”.<sup>28</sup> Riabchuk fails to mention, however, whether the poll data he uses includes the people of the occupied territory of the Donbas. Because the poll was conducted “face-to-face”, the war-torn zones of the Donbas may not have been included. Moreover, Riabchuk fails – deliberately or not – to mention that the people of the Donbas surveyed in July 2014, were sharply divided concerning the question of the independence of Ukraine: asked whether they would vote for the independence of Ukraine, 34% of people in the Donbas answered in the affirmative (13% “unambiguously” [однозначно] and 21% “rather” [скоріше]), 34% responded negatively (22% “unambiguously” and 12% “rather”), and the remaining 31% found it difficult to answer.<sup>29</sup> It turns out that while 69% of people in the Donbas considered themselves “patriots of Ukraine”, many of these patriots were not sure about the independence of Ukraine.

Since the summer of 2014, there may have been a sea-change in favour of an independent Ukraine. Available data are not unambiguous, however. One of the latest polls (conducted November 2015) shows that nearly half (47.6%) of people in the Ukrainian government-controlled Donbas answered negatively to the question: “Are you ready to defend your country?” 15.8% answered that they would take up arms, and 24.3 % would defend the country in a volunteer movement. The corresponding figure in the western regions of Ukraine are 18.1%, 29.8%, and 37.7% respectively. The same poll shows that 35.4% of people in the Donbas considered the on-going war in the Donbas a civil war between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian citizens of Ukraine, 22.5% a war between Ukraine and Russia, and 10.8% a separatist insurgency supported by Russia. The respective figures for the western regions are 5.5%, 44.5%, and 38.1%. Likewise, 43.7% of people in the Donbas consider the DNR and LNR representatives of the Donbas population, 35.6% terrorists, while 20.5% find the question “difficult to answer.”<sup>30</sup> The separatists thus enjoy an alarmingly strong

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 148. For conceptual weakness of Ruabchuk’s theoretical approach in general, see Anton Saifullayev, “Kolonializm ‘po-naszemu’ czyli o potrzebie zachowania ostrożności w używaniu metodologii postkolonialnej do badań nad Europą Wschodnią. Polemika z Mykołą Riabczukiem,” Nowy Prometeusz, no. 7 (kwiecień 2015), pp. 77-92.

<sup>29</sup> Соціологічна група РЕЙТИНГ, “Динаміка патріотичних настроїв,” p. 11, available at [http://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg\\_files/rg\\_patriotyzm\\_082014.pdf](http://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_patriotyzm_082014.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Центр Разумкова, “Громадяни України про безпеку: оцінки, загрози, шляхи вирішення проблем. Результати соціологічного дослідження,” [http://razumkov.org.ua/upload/1449050147\\_file.pdf](http://razumkov.org.ua/upload/1449050147_file.pdf), pp. 21–22.

support in the Ukrainian-government held territory of the Donbas. Thus, there still remains much ambiguity even in the Ukrainian government-controlled Donbas. No one knows for sure how much support the separatists enjoy in the Donbas territory they hold. The Donbas continues to baffle, dismay, and mislead outside observers. Whatever the case, there is no indication that ultimately the Donbas population, as a whole (including those living under occupation), will accept Moscow's rule. The likelihood is that they will come to the conclusion that the future of Ukraine and the Donbas lies in total independence from an autocratic Russia.

A disturbing question arises, however: what will happen if Russia changes faster than Ukraine? No one knows how long Putin will stay in power. If after Putin, Russia turns decisively democratic and grows prosperous, there is a danger of Kyiv losing at least some parts of the Donbas. This scenario is unlikely, but no one should exclude it. Much remains to be done if Kyiv is to re-capture the hearts and minds of the Donbas population.

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## **Jak zrozumieć Donbas w kontekście rosyjsko- ukraińskiego konfliktu w XXI w.**

*Hiroaki Kuromiya*

Wojna przeciwko Ukrainie, rozpoczęta przez Rosję wiosną 2014 roku, a trwająca do dzisiaj, zwróciła uwagę całego świata na ukraiński region Donbasu. Trwający konflikt ma miejsce w zasadzie w całości właśnie w Donbasie, przemysłowym centrum wydobywania węgla i produkcji stali oraz bastionie prorosyjskich separatystów, a jego skutkiem są tysiące ofiar, zarówno wśród żołnierzy, jak i cywili.

W przeciwieństwie do Krymu, Donbas lub region Doniecka nie były nigdy nazwami powszechnie znanymi poza granicami byłego Związku Sowieckiego. Fakt, iż tak mało wiadomo o Donbasie i jego przeszłości uniemożliwia komuś z zewnątrz zrozumienie nie tylko współczesnej sytuacji, ale również umieszczenie jej w szerszym kontekście historycznym Ukrainy i Rosji. Na dodatek, wszechobecna machina propagandowa Moskwy wykorzystuje tę ignorancję w celu zniekształcenia i zafalszowania historycznego i politycznego tła dzisiejszej wojny w Donbasie.

## **Как понять Донбасс в контексте российско- украинского конфликта в XXI веке**

*Хироаки Куромиа*

Война против Украины, развязанная Россией весной 2014 года, которая продолжается по сей день, приковала всеобщее внимание к украинскому региону Донбасс. Нынешний конфликт в промышленном центре добычи угля и производства стали, а также оплоте пророссийских сепаратистов, привел уже к тысячам жертв, среди солдат и гражданских лиц.

В отличие от Крыма, Донбасс или Донецкий регион, никогда не были широко известными названиями за пределами бывшего Советского Союза.

Тот факт, что о Донбассе и его прошлом известно так мало, является существенной преградой для того, чтобы кто-то извне мог разобраться как в текущей ситуации в регионе, но и посмотреть на неё в более широком историческом контексте отношений Украины с Россией. Кроме того, вездесущая пропагандистская машина Москвы использует это информационное невежество для искажения, а

Artykuł porusza kwestię historycznej tożsamości Donbasu i stawia sobie za cel nakreślenie ram, w których można zrozumieć obecny konflikt w tym regionie.

также исторической и политической фальсификации фона сегодняшней войны на Донбассе.

В статье поднимается вопрос об исторической идентичности Донбасса. Также автор стремится очертить рамки для понимания текущего конфликта в регионе.

