



Why the Donbas War Was Never “Civil”

Julia Kazdobina, Jakob Hedenskog & Andreas Umland
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Executive Summary

Exactly ten years before the publication of this report, on 12 April 2014, the Russo-Ukrainian War, which had begun with the start of Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea on 20 February 2014, became a larger, and more violent armed conflict. On that day, a paramilitary group led by a notorious Russian irregular fighter, the former FSB officer Igor Girkin, seized government buildings in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. The next day, Ukraine launched an Anti-Terrorist Operation, hoping to resolve the situation by limited means.

Despite the obvious involvement of Russian actors in the conflict from the very start, a continuously popular narrative on the fighting in the Donbas as an intra-Ukrainian civil war rather than a Russian-Ukrainian interstate war has survived until today. This report outlines why a conceptualization of the Donbas War as a civil armed conflict fails to capture several crucial aspects of the start and course of the 2014–2022 fighting in eastern Ukraine. Such a misconception also distracts observers from the larger – albeit abortive – Novorossia (New Russia) project that the Kremlin was trying to implement – and is still trying today.

Missing or downplaying Russia's role and tactics in starting and sustaining the war in the east of Ukraine prior to the 2022 full-scale invasion also led – and is still leading – to the promotion of unsuitable solutions to the confrontation. Continuing narration of the armed conflict in Donbas as a “civil war” has prevented western decision makers and the public from learning much-needed lessons amid Russia's ongoing subthreshold aggression against NATO as a whole and individual democratic countries in particular.

Introduction

Even many of those public commentators who today are sympathetic to Ukraine and condemn Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 remain ambivalent about its pre-history. Whether because of Russian propaganda, theoretical preconceptions, simple naivety or for other reasons, numerous foreign observers continue to make a sharp distinction between the fighting in Ukraine before and after this date.

Distrust of the Kremlin has increased among both western and non-western observers since 2022. Nonetheless, Moscow's 2014 narration of the origins and early events of the armed conflict in the Donetsk Basin (Donbas) in that year is still alive and well. Commentators across the globe continue to publicly conceptualize and label the 2014–2022 confrontation in Donbas as a “civil war”. The “separatists”, “insurgents” or “rebels” who started the fighting in 2014 may, according to this apology for Moscow's attack, have received support from Russia, but these were allegedly still local or irregular Russian protagonists acting alone. Either they or the Ukrainian state, or both, according to this narrative, began a civil war in which Moscow may have tinkered, but supposedly always played a secondary role.

Only eight years later, according to this interpretation, did Russia's attack on Ukraine become a proper and not just a hybrid war. Before 24 February 2022, there may have been a real war going on in eastern Ukraine, some would admit, but from this viewpoint, it had Ukrainian rather than Russian roots, and originated from intra-national rather than international tensions.

This continually popular narrative of the Donbas War as a civil armed conflict either neglects to mention or gravely underestimates four crucial aspects of the start and course of the 2014–22 confrontation in eastern Ukraine.¹ First, it ignores various non-kinetic forms of Russian subversion preparing the armed escalation in the spring of 2014. Second, it underplays the crucial role irregular Russian actors supported by Russian governmental agents played in the April 2014 transformation of civil unrest in the Donbas into a pseudo-civil war. Third, it typically disregards the contacts that irregular Russian and Ukrainian fighters had with the Russian state and fails to mention the context of Moscow's larger *Novorossia* (New Russia) project. Fourth, it downplays the size and impact of the already large-scale, but still covert, invasion of Ukraine by regular Russian troops that began in August 2014. We briefly deal with these four critical dimensions of the Donbas War below, provide some further references in the footnotes and formulate conclusions and some policy recommendations in the final section.

How Russia Instigated a “Rebellion” in Eastern Ukraine

The Donbas War was one of several results of a wider Russian attempt to take control of the largely Russian-speaking eastern and southern parts of Ukraine. Initially, the Kremlin intended to do so with as little overt military combat as possible. The best-known part of this largely non-kinetic and mostly covert, yet already comprehensively organized and clearly military, operation was Russia's annexation of Crimea between 20 February and 18 March

¹ Jakob Hauter, ed., *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014–2020* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2021).

2014.² The attempt to capture all of what Russian imperial nationalists call *Novorossiiia* included a multitude of other parallel subversive, hybrid, clandestine, soft actions designed to undermine social cohesion, political stability and state capacity in eastern and southern Ukraine and beyond.

Among the most important instruments of Russia's hybrid war in mainland Ukraine in early 2014 were Russia's mass media and Ukrainian media outlets under the influence of Russian or pro-Russian actors in Ukraine. As Yuri Matsiyevsky noted in a seminal 2014 PONARS debate on the origins of the Donbas War, a crucial "part of Russia's war in Ukraine is psychological warfare waged in the public sphere. The Russian authorities and media present the Ukrainian events exclusively in terms of illegal actions undertaken by protesters and their leaders, where 'coup' is a key term".³ According to Matsiyevsky, it was less the turbulence and violence of events in Kyiv in late 2013 and early 2014 than the existential fear generated by Russian and pro-Russian media about the putative repercussions of the Revolution of Dignity that mobilized eastern and southern Ukrainian grassroots separatism.

Even so, the effect of Moscow's demonization campaign on eastern Ukrainian public opinion remained limited. At that time, both Russian propaganda channels and foreign mass media often portrayed the pro-Russian demonstrations in the Donbas as expressions of the allegedly widespread popular mood. However, various opinion polls conducted before and during this phase paint a different picture. In March 2014, for instance, according to the highly reputable Ukrainian polling agency, Rating Group, only one-third of the residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions supported separation of the Donbas from Ukraine, while 56% rejected the idea.⁴ Many of the separatist actions in the cities of eastern and southern Ukraine were not locally initiated, but instead instigated, directed, and financed by Moscow.

In addition to other revelations, such as the so-called Surkov Leaks, the publication in the summer of 2016 of the by now infamous "Glazyev Tapes" revealed further details of the involvement of Russian state actors in the first separatist activities in eastern and southern mainland Ukraine.⁵ An interesting aspect of the recorded telephone conversations between Sergey Glazyev, an advisor to President Vladimir Putin, and local actors in Kharkiv, Odesa and Zaporizhzhia was the period in which they took place – in late February and early March 2014. As an official member of the Russian presidential administration, Glazyev discussed with his Ukrainian interlocutors various disruptive local actions to be undertaken and Moscow's payment for them. He was doing so even before the annexation of Crimea was complete. Many of the published accounts of events in eastern Ukraine in early 2014 that focus on pro-Russian Ukrainian protests may therefore have to be reassessed as expressions not so much

2 Julia Kazdobina, Jakob Hedenskog, and Andreas Umland, "Why the Russo-Ukrainian War Started Already in February 2014," *SCEEUS Report No. 2*, 2024. <https://sceeus.se/publikationer/why-the-russo-ukrainian-war-started-already-in-february-2014>

3 Yuriy Matsiyevsky, "The Limits of Kudelia's Argument: On the Sources of the Donbas 'Insurgency,'" *PONARS Eurasia*, 31 October 2014. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-limits-of-kudelia-s-argument-on-the-sources-of-the-donbas-insurgency/>.

4 «Ставлення українців до територіального устрою країни та статусу Крима – Україна», *Rating Group*, 14 March 2014., https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/otnoshenie_ukraincev_k_territorialnomu_ustroystvu_strany_i_statusu_kryma.html

5 Andreas Umland, "The Glazyev Tapes: Getting to the Root of the Conflict in Ukraine," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 November 2016. https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_glazyev_tapes_getting_to_the_root_of_the_conflict_in_7165/; Halya Coynash, "Glazyev Tapes Debunk Russia's Lies about Its Annexation of Crimea and Undeclared War against Ukraine," *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, 26 February 2019. <https://khpg.org/en/1551054011>; Sanshiro Hosaka, "Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019), pp. 750-773.

of local grievances, as of covert Russian political meddling.

The Moscow-initiated or supported actions must be seen against a backdrop of parallel peaceful pro-Ukrainian demonstrations in eastern Ukraine, which are often forgotten today. The biggest such rally in support of Ukrainian unity took place in Donetsk on 4 March 2014, in response to events in Crimea. While this meeting went peacefully, the next pro-Ukrainian rally on 13 March was physically attacked by several organized groups of young men who also charged an accompanying police bus. A pro-Ukrainian activist, Dmytro Chernyavkiy, was killed. In Donetsk, the attackers became known as “tourists” because they lacked local knowledge. Certain dialect words they used indicated that they may have been Russians from the neighbouring Russian Oblast of Rostov.⁶ The last pro-Ukrainian rally took place on 28 April 2014 and was also violently attacked by people in balaclavas armed with bats, gas canisters, chains, non-lethal pistols and knives. The attackers threw stones and stun grenades at the demonstrators. As a result, 15 people sustained serious injuries and five disappeared.⁷

Already on 3 March 2014, Russia had begun to amass military equipment on its border with the Luhansk, Donetsk and Kharkiv regions and to set up “refugee reception points”. Nonetheless, whereas regular Russian troops had by this time already fully occupied Crimea, Russia’s initial takeover of the Donbas was to be performed primarily by irregular Russian forces rather than by the Russian army.

How Russian Irregulars Led the Way to Violent Escalation

Not all the protests in eastern and southern Ukrainian towns and cities in the spring of 2014 were initiated and led by infiltrated Russian agents. Nonetheless, many of the actions before armed fighting began in April 2014 were the result of Russian propagandistic instigation rather than local orchestration. While the war in the Donbas was never a civil war in any meaningful sense of the word,⁸ the political conflict that preceded the war did have domestic roots.⁹ Up to a certain point, it was local collaborators encouraged and supported – in part financially – by Moscow rather than Russian citizens dispatched to Ukraine by the Kremlin who dominated the scene.

On 6 April 2014, pro-Russian separatist activists stormed the Oblast Administration building in Donetsk and the SBU headquarters in Luhansk. Unlike the earlier protests of previous weeks, these activists did not – one suspects with encouragement from Moscow – leave the buildings after a short period, but instead began to barricade themselves in.¹⁰ In Donetsk, the activists demanded a meeting of the regional council to vote for a referendum on joining

6 «Спротив на Донбасі був. Не менш небезпечний і героїчний, ніж в інших регіонах», *Укрінформ*, 13 березня 2014 р., https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3839434-sprotiv-na-donbasi-buv-ne-mens-nebezpechnij-i-geroicnij-niz-v-insih-regionah.html#google_vignette

7 “28 квітня 2014 року відбувся останній проукраїнський мітинг у Донецьку”, *Армія Інформ*, 28 квітня, 2020 <https://armyinform.com.ua/2020/04/28/28-kvitnya-2014-roku-%E2%88%92-ostannij-proukrayinskyj-mityng-u-doneczku/>

8 Andrew Wilson, “The Donbas in 2014: Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 4 (2016), pp. 631-652.

9 Serhiy Kudelia, “The Donbas Rift,” *Russian Politics & Law* 54, no. 1 (2016), pp. 5-27.

10 Jakob Hauter, *Russia’s Overlooked Invasion: The Causes of the 2014 Outbreak of War in Ukraine’s Donbas* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2023), p. 54.

Russia. When these demands were not met, on the following day the protesters held a meeting in the building to proclaim the “Donetsk People’s Republic” and call for a “referendum” on secession to be held on 11 May. Events in Luhansk followed an almost identical path, with the addition that the protesters also seized weapons from the SBU headquarters.¹¹

While tensions were therefore already high at this point, large-scale fighting started only in the second week of April. This new stage of confrontation featured the use of firearms and omnipresent Russian citizens. This escalation constituted the beginning of the Donbas War as an armed sub-conflict in Russia’s larger war on Ukraine, which had started with Russian troop movements in Crimea on 20 February 2014 and continues today. Thus, the Donbas War began on 12 April when administrative buildings were seized in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk in Donetsk Oblast under the leadership of irregular Russian fighters. The seizure of Sloviansk was followed by the first large-scale fighting of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

The anti-Ukrainian irregulars in Sloviansk were led by a Russian citizen, the retired Colonel and former FSB officer Igor Girkin (alias “Strelkov”). Girkin’s armed group of 50 or more irregular fighters had just arrived in mainland Ukraine – via Russia – from the already occupied Crimea, where most of these men had participated in the annexation. During the military capture of Crimea, Russian irregulars such as Girkin and his group had played only a secondary role, merely assisting unmarked regular Russian troops.

In Donbas in April, by contrast, Girkin’s group played a decisive role in the transformation of the regional civil conflict into a delegated interstate war between Russia and Ukraine.¹² In an interview for the far-right Russian weekly *Zavtra* (Tomorrow) in November 2014, Girkin admitted: “I pulled the trigger for the war. If our [armed] unit had not crossed the border [from Russia into Ukraine], everything would not have turned out the way it did in [north-eastern Ukraine’s] Kharkiv and [southern Ukraine’s] Odesa. [...] [T]he impetus for the war, which is still going on today, was given by our [armed] unit. We shuffled all the cards that were on the table. All of them!”¹³

How many of Girkin’s men were Russian citizens is difficult to determine. In his 2023 path-breaking study, *Russia’s Overlooked Invasion*, Jakob Hauter established the identities of 27 of these men, nine of whom were Russian citizens.¹⁴ There may have been more. During the attack on the local police headquarters in Kramatorsk on the same day, an armed militant shouted “отойди за поребрик” (step back behind the curb). For Ukrainians this was a clear indication of Russian involvement since “поребрик” is used in some Russian regions but not used anywhere in Ukraine.¹⁵

11 Olga Rudenko, “Kharkiv settles down, while pro-Russian separatists still hold buildings in Luhansk, Donetsk”, *Kyiv Post*, 8 April 2014. <https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/war-against-ukraine/kharkiv-settles-down-while-pro-russian-separatists-still-hold-buildings-in-luhansk-donetsk-342517.html>.

12 Jakob Hauter, “Delegated Interstate War: Introducing an Addition to Armed Conflict Typologies.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 12, no. 4 (2019): 90–103. <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.12.4.1756>.

13 As quoted in: Julian Hans, “Russischer Geheimdienstler zur Ostukraine: ‘Den Auslöser zum Krieg habe ich gedrückt,’” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 November 2014. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/russischer-geheimdienstler-zur-ostukraine-den-ausloeser-zum-krieg-habe-ich-gedrueckt-1.2231494>.

14 Hauter, *Russia’s Overlooked Invasion*, pp. 130-137

15 “Появилось видеодоказательство: в Краматорске орудуют россияне,” Украинская правда, 13 апреля, 2014 <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2014/04/13/7022247/> The video itself can be found at the link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_eLCWl2sZQ

On 13 April, Acting President of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchynov announced the start of an Anti-terrorist Operation (ATO). On the same day, armed groups seized control of the police department in Horlivka, Donetsk Oblast. They were commanded by Russian citizen Igor Bezler who presented himself to defecting Ukrainian police officers as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Russian army. According to the Ukrainian Prosecutor's Office, Bezler, like Girkin and his company, had earlier been involved in the occupation of Crimea where he had become infamous for torturing Ukrainian civic activists.¹⁶

How Ukraine's So-Called Separatists Were Guided by Moscow

Apart from the controversy surrounding the significance of Russian actors in the alleged civil war in Ukraine, there is a secondary debate about the irregular fighters' connections to the Russian state. Some observers accept the prominent role of Russian citizens in the outbreak of the fighting and establishment of the so-called people's republics but still insist that this feature is not weighty enough to classify the conflict as an interstate war. The fact that most of the Russian intruders into Ukraine in the spring of 2014 were not regular soldiers or other Russian servicemen, but seemingly random adventurers is seen as sufficient to assert that the war in the Donbas was still then a civil war.¹⁷

The Ukrainian government's initial decision to launch the defensive operation as an anti-terrorist rather than a military one – despite evidence from the start of deep Russian involvement in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk – is sometimes also interpreted as evidence of an intrastate rather than an international conflict. However, this decision was made on pragmatic rather than paradigmatic grounds, mainly because the prevention of separatism is covered by Ukraine's counterterrorism legislation rather than defence-related laws. In addition, Kyiv was in April 2014 unwilling to impose martial law ahead of the presidential elections, which were scheduled for May 2014 and would have had to be cancelled under a state of emergency. Only in 2018, through Ukraine's new Law on De-occupation, was the ATO under the auspices of the intelligence service SBU replaced by a joint forces operation (JFO) under military command.¹⁸

Several deep scholarly investigations of the pre-history, outbreak and course of the Donbas War have revealed and analysed multiple connections between seemingly independent irregular anti-Ukrainian actors in eastern Ukraine, on the one hand, and Russian state organs, be they in Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, Simferopol or elsewhere, on the other. The Germany-based Russian historian Nikolay Mitrokhin was the first prominent academic to highlight the crucial role not only of Russian irregular actors, but also of the Russian state in the outbreak of the putatively civil Donbas War.¹⁹ Later on, the Japanese political scientist Sanshiro Hosaka

16 "Катування «Автомайдану» в Криму: бойовик Безлер отримав 12 років тюрми," *Укрінформ*, 8 березня, 2024 <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-crimea/3837189-katuvanna-avtomajdanu-v-krimu-bojovik-bezler-otrimav-12-rokiv-turmi.html>; for an in-depth investigation of Bezler's ties to the Russian state, see Hauter, *Russia's Overlooked Invasion*, pp. 170-178

17 Matveeva, Anna. *Through Times of Trouble. Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine Explained from Within*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018; Matveeva, Anna. "No Moscow Stooges: Identity Polarization and Guerrilla Movements in Donbass." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 25–50.

18 Hanna Shelest, "Defend. Resist. Repeat: Ukraine's lessons for European defence", *Policy Brief*, European Council of Foreign Relations, 9 November 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/defend-resist-repeat-ukraines-lessons-for-european-defence/>.

19 Nikolay Mitrokhin, "Transnational Provokation: Russische Nationalisten und Geheimdienstler in der Ukraine," *Osteuropa* 64, nos. 5-6 (2014), pp. 157-174; *idem*, "Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion: Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine," *Osteuropa* 64, no.

and the above-mentioned Jakob Hauter, among other analysts, confirmed and supported Mitrokhin's early analyses.²⁰

Even before the appearance of detailed empirical investigations into the involvement of the Russian state, this appeared to be the most plausible explanation for the outbreak of the war. The wider political context of the military escalation in Donbas in the spring of 2014 was suggestive from the start. It could hardly have been a coincidence that war had been in the making and eventually broke out in the same period as regular Russian troops were capturing Crimea and when Russia was accelerating a multidirectional hybrid attack against mainland Ukraine. A strange aspect of the seeming "rebellion" in the Donbas was always that, from beginning to end, it never included any well-known political or other leaders or relevant political or other organizations from the region.²¹

In May 2014, a month after it began, Mitrokhin characterized the war as an "Invasion of the Farcians" in a Russian play on the word Martians; that is, a military adventure of farcical figures from Russia and Ukraine.²² The dubious biographies of the hitherto marginal persons who led the alleged rebellion helped the Russian state to plausibly deny its own involvement in triggering the war. The omnipresence of many "Farcians", however, also revealed a lack of involvement in the putative uprising by the region's political, civil and economic grassroots.

Other contextual factors also question the – still popular even among seasoned researchers – endogenous explanation for the outbreak of the Donbas War. The most important wider political context for the war was already visible in the larger Russian expansionist ambitions beyond the Donbas and even beyond Ukraine. The Glazyev Tapes indicate that the aim of Russian expansionism was not limited to Crimea and the Donbas, but instead referred to the Tsarist imperial project of control over the northern Black Sea shores under the label of *Novorossiiia*. The *Novorossiiia* project had been revived in various ways in the 1990s by Russian imperialist nationalists such as Aleksandr Dugin and Evgenii Morozov.²³

Vladimir Putin publicly mentioned *Novorossiiia* for the first time on 17 April 2014, and included

8 (2014), pp. 3-16; Николай Митрохин, "Грубые люди: как русские националисты спровоцировали гражданскую войну в Украине," *Форум новейшей восточноевропейской истории и культуры* 11, no. 2 (2014), pp. 53-74; Nikolai Mitrokhin, "Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia's War in the Donbass," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, no. 1 (2015), pp. 219-250.

20 Sanshiro Hosaka, "Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019), pp. 750-773; *idem*, "Enough with Donbas 'Civil War' Narratives? Identifying the Main Combatant Leading 'the Bulk of the Fighting,'" in: Jakob Hauter, ed., *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2021), pp. 89-112; Hauter, *Russia's Overlooked Invasion*.

21 Sergiy Kudelia, "Domestic Sources of the Donbas Insurgency," *PONARS Eurasia*, 29 September 2014. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/new-policy-memo-domestic-sources-of-the-donbas-insurgency/>; Andreas Umland, "In Defense of Conspirology: A Rejoinder to Serhiy Kudelia's Anti-Political Analysis of the Hybrid War in Eastern Ukraine," *PONARS Eurasia*, 30 September 2014. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/in-defense-of-conspirology-a-rejoinder-to-serhiy-kudelia-s-anti-political-analysis-of-the-hybrid-war-in-eastern-ukraine/>.

22 Николай Митрохин, "Нашествие фарсиан," *Грани*, 19 мая 2014. <https://graniru.org/opinion/mitrokhin/m.229356.html>.

23 Andreas Umland, "Vitrenko's Flirtation with Russian 'Neo-Eurasianism,'" *Kyiv Post*, 14 June 2007. <https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/vitrenkos-flirtation-with-russian-neo-urasianism-26787.html>; Wilfried Jilge, "Die Ukraine aus Sicht des 'Russkij Mir,'" *Russland-Analysen*, no. 278 (2014), pp. 2-5; Anton Shekhovtsov, "Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism and the Russian-Ukrainian War," in: Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo, eds., *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 181-201; Marlene Laruelle, "Alexander Dugin and Eurasianism," in: Mark Sedgwick, ed., *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2019), pp. 155-169.

eight Ukrainian oblasts “from Kharkiv to Odesa” in this neo-imperial reference.²⁴ The Donbas War was thus, like the annexation of Crimea, only one of several explications of Russia’s revived imperial plans, which were geographically not limited to the Donets Basin and south-eastern Ukraine. They also included, to mention a lesser-known episode in this story, parts of Moldova that became the target of Russian irredentist hybrid activities during this period.

On 3 February 2014, less than three weeks before the start of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the de facto authorities of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in southern Moldova organized a sham referendum in which 98 per cent of the local population were reported to have voted for integration with Russia’s Customs Union. One year later, in April 2015, a number of putative representatives of ethnic groups living in the southern parts of Ukraine’s Odesa Oblast proclaimed a “Bessarabian People’s Council” promoting autonomy for the multi-ethnic south-west corner of Ukraine.²⁵ In October the same year, this “council” proclaimed independence and announced that it would also include Gagauzia.²⁶ These and similar activities along the Black Sea shores were part and parcel of a larger *Novorossia* project already emanating from Moscow. They cannot and should not be ignored when discussing the origins of the Donbas War.²⁷

How Russian Regular Forces Intervened in the Donbas War

Even today, Russia vehemently denies that its regular troops were actively involved on the ground in the conduct of the Donbas War. This was indeed largely the case until late August 2014. Nonetheless, in addition to the crucial role of Russian regular troops in the annexation of Crimea, a number instances in mainland Ukraine indicate the presence of not only irregular but also regular Russian soldiers.

In the most infamous such exception, the crew of a Buk TELAR self-propelled surface-to-air missile system belonging to the Russian Air Defence forces entered eastern Ukraine territory for a few days in July 2014. The unit was apparently one of several teams of Russian soldiers and agents tasked with covertly assisting the pro-Russian irregular fighters financed and guided by Moscow in their delegated war against Ukraine. The Buk unit had the obvious task of combating the Ukrainian air force but, as is well known, accidentally shot down the Malaysian Airlines passenger flight MH-17, which was flying over the Donbas on 17 July 2014 with 298 civilians on board, among them 80 children. All 15 members of the crew and all 283 passengers were killed.

The Dutch trial in absentia of four fighters – three Russian citizens and one Ukrainian citizen – from the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) who participated in the operation was an equivocal procedure. The investigators, prosecutors and court did an excellent job in

24 «Пять громких заявлений Путина об истории Украины,» *BBC News Україна*, 10 November 2014, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/ukraine_in_russian/2014/11/141110_ru_s_putin_on_history_ukraine.

25 Alya Shandra and Robert Seely. “The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine,” *The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, 2019. pp. 49-51.

26 Jakob Hedenskog, “A Weakened Moldova Enters the Russian Orbit,” *FOI Memo*, no. 5608 (2016), Swedish Defence Research Agency, <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20MEMO%205608>.

27 Marlene Laruelle, “The three colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian nationalist mythmaking of the Ukrainian crisis,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2016), pp. 55-74.

establishing the details of this mass crime but the trial curiously misassigned responsibility to three irregular combatants rather than the Russian army and state. The Court stated that the “DPR combatants and therefore also the accused cannot be regarded as part of the armed forces of the Russian Federation”, but also acknowledged that “the use of a Buk TELAR [...] requires a highly trained crew. Moreover, the weapon cannot be casually deployed”.²⁸

Nonetheless, the court ruled that it considered it “legally and conclusively proven that Girkin was in a position to decide on the deployment and use of the Buk TELAR”. Such an assessment, however, is doubtful. The three convicted DPR irregulars, including Girkin, were neither technically qualified to deploy this heavy weapon of the Russian army nor legally empowered to give orders to the Russian soldiers operating the Buk. Responsibility for the mission and the actions of the Buk crew lies with these soldiers’ direct superiors and eventually with the Russian commander-in-chief, Vladimir Putin.

At the same time as smaller Russian regular detachments like the Buk unit were supporting the pro-Russian irregulars fighting in Donbas, the Russian army started shooting across the border at Ukrainian troops. In July 2014, a number of rocket and artillery attacks on Ukrainian positions from Russian territory were captured on camera and video. The first such attack occurred on 11 July 2014 near the village of Zelenopillya in Luhansk Oblast, resulting in the deaths of 30 Ukrainian soldiers and border guards. In a report published in December 2016, the open-source intelligence (OSINT) group, Bellingcat, described Russian shelling of Ukraine on at least 149 separate occasions.²⁹

In the following month, Russia eventually invaded mainland Ukraine on a large scale. On 15 August 2014, the Ukrainian National Security and Defence Council (NSDC) reported that, on the previous day, foreign journalists had witnessed for the first time how a large column of over 20 armoured personnel carriers and other vehicles of the Russian army crossed the Russian-Ukrainian border. The NSDC stressed that it had previously reported such cases, but this was a case of a massive intrusion by Russian regular forces into mainland Ukraine confirmed by independent observers.³⁰

By late August 2014, up to eight regular so-called battalion tactical groups (BTGs) of Russia’s armed forces had been deployed on the territory of Ukraine, four in the Luhansk and four in the direction of Donetsk. The BTGs were reinforced by additional special forces. By late August 2014, the approximate combined presence of regular forces of the Russian Federation on Ukrainian territory amounted to over 6,000 personnel, up to 70 tanks, around 270 combat armoured vehicles, up to 90 artillery systems and up to 85 multiple rocket launchers.³¹ According to the Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, by the most conservative estimate, 150 regular soldiers of the Russian army died in the first large battle

28 “Transcript of the MH17 Judgment Hearing,” *The District Court of The Hague*, 17 November 2022. <https://www.courtmh17.com/en/insights/news/2022/transcript-of-the-mh17-judgment-hearing/>.

29 Sean Case and Klement Anders, “Putin’s Undeclared War: Summer 2014 – Russian Artillery Strikes against Ukraine,” *Bellingcat*, 21 December 2016. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2016/12/21/russian-artillery-strikes-against-ukraine/>; Олексій Гритсенко, Роман Ребрій, «Обстріли України з території Росії: докази міжнародних організацій,» *Радіо Свобода*, 27 August 2018. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/29454270.html>.

30 “РНБО підтверджує в’їзд російської військової колони до України,” *Radio Liberty*, 15 August 2014. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/26532261.html>.

31 «Аналіз бойових дій у серпні-вересні 2014 року,» *Міністерство оборони України*, n.d., https://www.mil.gov.ua/content/other/anliz_rf.pdf.

of the Russo-Ukrainian War at Ilovaisk in late August to early September 2014.³²

Conclusion: Setting the Narrative Straight

27 On February 2024, three days after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholz made a famous speech in the Germany Parliament (*Bundestag*) where he announced a "change of times" (*Zeitenwende*) in European politics. This report on events in the Donbas in April to September 2014, and our earlier exploration of the annexation of Crimea in February–March 2014, have shown that several dates in 2014 would have been suitable occasions for announcing this change of times.³³ The start of the occupation of Crimea on 20 February and the completion of its annexation on 18 March, the beginning of the Donbas War on 12 April, the shooting down of Flight MH-17 on 17 July or the first large-scale crossing of Russian regular troops over the Russo-Ukrainian border on 14 August could, among other events in this period, all have served as starting points for a deep rethinking of Eastern European geopolitics and security. Instead, the lack of such a fundamental re-conceptualization and redirection of foreign policy encouraged the Kremlin to attack Ukraine in a full-scale invasion eight years later.

This report complements some seminal empirical investigations by, among others, Nikolai Mitrokhin, Sanshiro Hosaka and Jakob Hauter.³⁴ It attempts to synthesize some of their findings, and those of other researchers, to periodize Russia's instigation and inflammation of war in mainland Ukraine in the first half of 2014, and to put these Russian actions in the wider context of the Kremlin's *Novorossia* project. By 2024, a considerable amount of research has accumulated that debunks the conceptualization of the Donbas phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War as a civil war. As this report demonstrates, there are several arguments – both conceptual and empirical – to suggest that the Donbas War should be interpreted as a delegated interstate war rather than a Ukrainian intrastate conflict.

Nonetheless, many politicians, journalists and diplomats, and even some scholars across the globe, when commenting on these events still follow the Kremlin's propaganda narrative on the Donbas War of the past 10 years. This misperception had, until 2022, been partly reinforced by the reporting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission (SMM), as well as communications from the Trilateral Contact Group, the Normandy Format and other institutions that were all destructively ambiguous about the nature of the conflict and called on all sides to show restraint. As Russia was (and still is) a participant in the OSCE and used its voice well as a veto power to subvert diplomatic efforts to stop or contain the conflict, the various agreements, negotiations and observation formats since 2014 contributed to the conflict's continuation and eventual escalation. Moreover, large parts of the Russian, western and non-western public still misperceive Russia's covert military attack on Ukraine between April 2014 and February 2022 as an intrastate conflict between different forces and regions of Ukraine. They continue to miss the already wider Russian aim to bring down a pro-European and

32 «Полный текст доклада 'Путин. Война',» *Дождь*, 12 May 2015, https://tvrain.tv/news/opublikovan_doklad_putin_vojna-387180/.

33 Kazdobina, Hedenskog, and Umland, "Why the Russo-Ukrainian War Started Already in February 2014."

34 Mitrokhin, "Transnational Provokation;" *idem*, "Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion;" Hosaka, "Welcome to Surkov's Theater;" *idem*, "Enough with Donbas 'Civil War' Narratives?" Hauter, *Russia's Overlooked Invasion*; etc.

democratic government in Kyiv, and to re-establish Ukraine's role within Russia's sphere of influence. This Russian aim has been consistent and constant since 2014, if not before, and various methods and means have been employed to achieve it. Against this backdrop, further journalistic, scholarly and other research is needed on the preparations for, and course and effects of Moscow's meddling and intrusion in Ukraine in 2014.

Media, political, academic, civic and other commentators should ensure that they get the origins and nature of the war right. Politicians, diplomats and other actors interested in Ukraine's future should explicitly and continuously emphasize in their public and non-public statements that the armed conflict in the Donbas in 2014–2022 was a delegated interstate war between Russia and Ukraine, and not an intra-Ukrainian civil war. As Gautama Buddha taught: "Whatever words we utter should be chosen with care for people will hear them and be influenced by them for good or ill".



Julia Kazdobina

Visiting Fellow at SCEEUS during January-March 2024. Julia is a Senior Fellow at Ukrainian Prism's Security Studies Program. As former Advisor to the Information Policy Minister of Ukraine (2016-2019), Julia coordinated the drafting of the government information strategy for Crimea, adopted by the Cabinet in December 2018.



Jakob Hedenskog

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.



Andreas Umland

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

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