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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Introduction to the Special Issue: The Donbas Conflict

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Introduction

Many scholarly studies of the Ukrainian conflict look at its origins, focusing either on the international level (external interference) or the domestic one (including ethnic, linguistic, economic, and regional tensions) (Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa 2015). The international level of analysis draws attention to external factors, namely Russia's conscious decision to fragment Ukraine and make it a "failed state" in order to avoid its moving closer to the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Even though Moscow denies playing any role in the conflict, several international and independent Russian sources have confirmed the direct involvement of Russian regular troops (Urban 2015; Sutyagin 2015; Yashin and Shorina 2015). For scholars who emphasize the primacy of the international aspect of the conflict, the current war in Donetsk and Luhansk is not a civil war but a war orchestrated and directed from Moscow against Ukraine via Russian proxies (Motyl 2014; Kuzio 2015).

A second category of scholars emphasizes tensions within the Ukrainian state and sees eastern Ukraine, particularly the Donbas region (as well as Crimea), as the most troublesome and volatile part of the country. A first group of domestic-focused scholars insists on the role of ethnicity, language, and fragmented identities (Arel 2014; Kulyk 2012; Sotiriou 2016). A second group advances an analysis of Ukraine's structural weaknesses, in terms of historical legacies, state functioning, relations between the political authorities and the oligarchs, and deep regional divides (Kudelia 2012; Katchanovski 2014; Darden 2014; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2015; Sakwa 2015; Shevel 2015). A third group favors an economic interpretation of the conflict (Zhukov 2014), as well as the autonomy of indigenous actors such as local political and economic elites (Matveeva 2016; Matsuzato 2017).

These two research directions confronted each other in two public debates. Sergiy Kudelia (2014) proposed a research agenda that would focus on the literature of group-based strategies and emotional responses (Gurr 1970; Horowitz 2001; Petersen 2002) in order to interpret the considerable grievances of the Donbas population toward the Ukrainian state. Andreas Umland countered this by stating that none of the insurgent groups had the organizational or financial resources to fund a protest movement—a sign, according to him, that they should be understood as Moscow's proxies (Umland 2014). A second debate has emerged as a reaction to Driscoll's (2019) use of the notion of "civil war" to describe the conflict.

Yet it is not contradictory to consider both that the Donbas conflict relies on widespread grassroots discontent that drove it from peaceful protests to violence[1] *and* that Moscow was able to instrumentalize and feed this discontent to its own ends—warfare against the Euromaidan government. Petersen's (2011) work on the Western intervention in the Balkans and Mylonas' (2013) study of the rationale behind a state's decision to mobilize co-ethnics abroad are good examples of this trend that emphasizes the interplay between domestic issues and foreign agendas. Local leaders, even if funded abroad, are not pure puppets or pawns of their patrons. They are rooted in local, everyday politics that allows them to secure local support and act as powerbrokers with decision-making autonomy and the

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ability to combine local grievances with a "higher" geopolitical agenda (Diani 2003; Polletta and Jasper 2001; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly 2008).

Five years after the beginning of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, we are still lacking a comprehensive, scholarship-based, multilayered analysis able to integrate the conflict's different dimensions. We are also missing a comparative study of both the Russian and the Ukrainian sides that would interpret them as a mirror game, intimately interrelated and responding to each other. This special issue hopes to add one modest layer to our knowledge of the conflict by looking at both sides simultaneously, combining research on Ukraine and on Russia, with a specific focus on actors' agency.

Opening this special issue, Sergiy Kudelia's article explores the impact of regional identity on the population's perception of the conflict. Based on a survey conducted in eight towns of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in spring 2015, it shows that respondents who identified themselves with "Donbas" advanced more positive views of the secessionist authorities, interpreting the insurgencies as being based on genuine ideational motives and not seeing them as feeding insecurity. On the contrary, those who identified with "Ukraine" as a whole were more critical, seeing the secessionist authorities as criminal groups responsible for violence. His study confirms the deep divide over interpreting the motives of the conflict; different storylines may remain a barrier to reconciliation and the future reintegration of the two insurgent regions.

On the Russian side, if public support for the annexation of Crimea was highly consensual and easy to secure, the Donbas conflict necessitates more public relations work to make it both controllable by the Kremlin and logical to domestic public opinion while securing Moscow's "plausible deniability" of supporting local insurgents. On the latter point, Sanshiro Hosaka, inspired by Wilson's "virtual politics" frame, investigates the so-called Surkov leaks—thousands of emails, released by Ukrainian hackers, that allegedly belong to Vladislav Surkov. His article offers an insightful window into how the Kremlin managed—or orchestrated, depending on the reader's interpretation—the different plots and storylines created around the Donbas conflict by myriad actors. If the leaks disappoint those hoping to find a well-crafted Kremlin-led secret plan to drive Ukraine apart, they nevertheless reveal the everyday chaotic, reactive management of the Novorossiya myth.

As previously said, Hosaka's findings do not contradict Kudelia's, as the two studies are situated at different levels. The fact that part of the Donbas population feels genuine solidarity with the insurgents' discourse on the region's specific identity does not preclude the Kremlin from having regulated and oriented the narratives and the actions of all the powerbrokers mediating between the insurgents and the Russian authorities.

The following three articles delve into the question of "volunteer fighters"—an understudied angle, for obvious reasons related to difficult fieldwork conditions and challenges to data collection. With the exception of the work of András Rácz, who attempted to calculate the number of foreign fighters on the Russian side following different methods and arrived at a conservative estimate of between 8,000 and 15,000 (Rácz 2017), we do not have at our disposal in-depth research on the topic. In this issue, Ivan Gomza and Johann Zajaczkowski investigate the case of the Azov movement, which became the most active and influential far-right actor on the Ukrainian scene due to its legitimacy as a paramilitary battalion that proved efficient on the battle front and helped the Ukrainian army to secure territory and regain some of the towns lost to insurgents. The movement has now succeeded in entering more institutionalized politics, deploying its veterans' *esprit de corps* to lobby intensely and develop vigilante activities against those deemed unpatriotic.

The last two last articles explore the destiny of Russian volunteer fighters in Donbas, which has been more challenging than that of their Ukrainian counterparts. Whereas the Azov fighters are celebrated as national heroes in Ukraine, the Russian fighters find themselves in a gray zone, since the Russian authorities do not recognize their involvement in the conflict and can therefore honor neither fallen soldiers nor volunteer fighters. Natalia Yudina and Alexander Verkhovsky first look at the Russian nationalist groups' engagement to Donbas and their path to it, either by individual

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choice or by following more organized strategies advanced by institutionalized groups such as Cossacks or the main radical movements. At the same time as volunteers were fighting alongside the insurgents, the Russian ultra-right movement entered into a deep crisis it has yet to exit, leaving fighters with few options once back home. Marlene Laruelle seconds that analysis by tracing the transformations of the Novorossiya utopia from the point at which volunteer fighters began to return to Russia and found themselves compelled to reinvent themselves in a new context. She delves into the main Donbas celebrities' struggle to reconvert from war into politics—the destinies of Igor Strelkov, Aleksandr Borodai, and Zakhar Prilepin exemplify this trend—and the replacement of action on the ground with investment in the *Novorossievedenie* literature or *publitsistika*. Her article concludes by stating that Novorossiya as a utopia has died, surviving only in the literary realm, with limited connections to the frozen conflict going on in Donbas.

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Note

1 Low state capacity and legitimacy is prominent in today's literature on the causes of civil war. See Fearon 2007; Laitin 2007; Laitin and Shapiro 2007; Hoeffler 2011; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Sambanis 2005; etc.

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