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TO WHAT EXTENT WERE ETHNIC DIVISIONS IN DONBAS A DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE RUSSIAN 2022 INVASION?*

Abstract: On the 11th May 2014, the self-proclaimed “People’s Republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk, which had emerged in opposition to the Maidan revolution which ousted President Viktor Yanukovich, would hold referendums on the issue of independence from the state of Ukraine. These referendums, which were considered illegal by the Ukrainian government, were subsequently followed by eight years of conflict in the Donbas region, leading up to the February 2022 full scale Russian invasion. This research will seek to examine how the Russian Federation, as a state actor, co-opted and reframed economic and social problems that resulted from the failure of the state-building process in Donbas since 2014, presenting them as ethno-nationalist grievances, in order to establish a pretext for the 2022 invasion. The research will include an exploration of the history of the Donbas region and reactions to Ukrainian independence, polling before and after the Maidan revolution in the occupied regions until 2020, and the economic and social problems (specifically citizenship and voting) that emerged after the stalling of the *Novorossija* project. The article will then compare these real world events with statements from the Russian media, examining how grievances were consistently framed as a national issue, whilst pushing the narrative that ethnic Russians and Russophones were under threat in Donbas.

Keywords: *Donbas, Russian nationalism, Ukraine, Russian Federation, ethno-nationalism.*

IN CHE MISURA LE DIVISIONI ETNICHE NEL DONBAS HANNO DATO IMPULSO ALL’INVASIONE RUSSA DEL 2022?

Abstract: L’11 maggio 2014 le autoproclamate “Repubbliche Popolari” di Donec’k e Luhans’k, sorte in opposizione alla rivoluzione del Majdan che aveva rovesciato il presidente Viktor Janukovič, tennero dei referendum sulla questione dell’indipendenza dallo Stato ucraino. A questi referendum, considerati illegali dal governo ucraino, seguirono poi otto anni di conflitto nella regione del Donbas, culminati nel febbraio 2022 in un’invasione su vasta scala da parte della Federazione Russa. Questa ricerca tenterà di esaminare il modo in cui la Federazione Russa come attore statale ha cooptato e ridefinito i problemi economici e sociali risultanti dal fallimento del processo di costruzione statale avviatosi nel Donbass dal 2014, presentandoli come rimostranze etnonazionaliste onde avere un pretesto per l’invasione del 2022. La ricerca comprenderà anche un’ esplorazione della storia della regione del Donbas e le reazioni all’indipendenza ucraina, i sondaggi nelle regioni occupate prima e dopo la rivoluzione del Majdan fino al 2020, e i problemi economici e sociali (in particolare la cittadinanza e il voto) emersi dopo lo stallo del progetto della *Novorossija*. L’articolo inoltre metterà a confronto questi eventi del mondo reale con le dichiarazioni dei media russi, esaminando il modo in cui le rimostranze venivano sistematicamente ridefinite come una questione nazionale, al tempo stesso portando avanti la narrazione secondo la quale nel Donbas i russi e i russofoni erano in pericolo.

Parole chiave: *Donbas, nazionalismo russo, Ucraina, Federazione Russa, etnonazionalismo.*

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Introduction

Three days before the start of Russia's «special military operation» in Ukraine on February 21st 2022, and exactly eight years since former President Yanukovich fled Kyiv, Vladimir Putin signed into law the decree finally recognizing the breakaway regions of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) in connection with «appeals from separatist leaders» (Onuch 2014: 46; Miklasová 2022). Whilst the rest of the world looked on in horror as Russian tanks crossed the border from Belarus on February 24th, rhetoric from the Kremlin pronounced its actions as necessary in defence of the population of both ethnic Russians and Russophone in East Ukraine, which it saw as one and the same. Putin and the Russian media proclaimed that they had been left «no choice» after «eight years of genocide in Donbas»¹. Whilst scholars and public figures quickly decried the characterization of the War in Donbas as a «genocide», and would point to various events such as the downing of flight MH17 as contributing to the number of civilian casualties, the Kremlin narrative would remain the same (Kursani 2022: 1). Russia was conducting a «special military operation», to defend the ethnic Russian population. In order to understand the events that occurred on the 21st and 24th, it is therefore necessary go back and examine the region of Donbas and the events that occurred over the last three decades. This research will then seek to establish, whether a more economics focused approach to the conflict can provide answers to key shifts in national identity, in comparison to a purely ethno-national perspective. The two factors deeply intertwined, with economic and social issues being leveraged by the Russian state, to alter perceptions of the conflict as ethno-national both amongst the Russian population, and in the West. One caveat to acknowledge however, is that due to the complexity of the situation, this study can only ever form one of many possible explanations to the conflict.

Ethno-nationalism and Conflict

Before analyzing particular causal factors influencing the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it is first necessary to calibrate how we might view ethno-nationalism in the context of intra-state conflicts. In order to do this, we will first draw on the work of Andreas Wimmer, who tackles this issue through quantitative analysis in his 2013 book *Waves of War*. For Wimmer ethnicity can be defined as «subjectively perceived membership in a community based on the belief of common ancestry and shared culture» (2013: 260). Ethno-nationalist power relations can therefore be broken down into three distinct boundaries: 1. the «territorial

¹ «Address by the President of the Russian Federation», 24-II-2022, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>> (last visit 20-XII-2023).

boundaries of the state», 2. Those who «share government power» and those who «are not represented» (excluded) and 3. «ethnic cleavages» amongst the wider population (Wimmer 2013: 150). Ethnic conflicts can therefore be characterized as those fought «over ethno-national self-determination, the ethnic balance of power in government, ethno-regional autonomy, ethnic and racial discrimination», or «language and other cultural rights» (Wimmer - Cederman - Min 2009: 5). These conflicts might then be further broken down into «rebellions», wherein conflicts are fought in the name of «excluded groups» and «infighting» where conflicts are fought in the name of «groups in power». These conflicts can be secessionist or non-secessionist in nature (*ibid.*: 6). When analyzing conflicts, an ethnic category within a state can be considered relevant if «at least one significant political actor claims to represent the interests of that group» or if members of the group are «intentionally discriminated against» (Wimmer 2013: 260).

Particularly relevant to the War in Ukraine is Wimmer's explanation of how pairs of states may also see «higher levels of conflict (including war) if an ethnic group is dominant in one state and dominated or mobilised in anti-government protests in the neighboring state» (*ibid.*: 118). Similarly, states might then act «to protect co-nationals living across a state border from ethnic discrimination» and «may be tempted to annex the corresponding territory in the name of “national unification”» (as argued by Saideman - Ayres 2008 in Wimmer 2013: 117). Wimmer notes how this is often done to «show their own constituency that they care “about our ethnic brothers” across the border» (*ibidem*). At first glance this description might seem remarkably familiar given the context of the invasion of Ukraine and events in Donbas in 2014 and to an extent this narrative is certainly applicable. However, as we will begin to uncover, the “ethnic” element in the context of Donbas is more complex than one might first assume. This article will therefore seek to explain mobilization in Donbas in the context of social, economic and security concerns following the Maidan Revolution, which in turn led to a gradual increase in the number of citizens seeking stability through union with Russia. This will then be examined in the light of the Russian government and media reframing the narrative to present the conflict along ethnic lines.

The Donbas Region

In order to fully understand this, however, it is first essential to gain an insight into the deeper history of the region. The Donbas, which was originally short for “Donets Coal Basin” (after the Donets River), is an area made up of a variety of industrial and mining cities located in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine (Stebelsky 2018: 34). Historically the Donbas region extends from South Eastern Ukraine to the Rostov-on-Don area of present day Russia, surrounded partly by the Sea of Azov in an area which was previously known as the «wild fields» during the time of the Polish-Lithuanian empire (Kuromiya 1998: 12). The term *Novorossiya*, which has become infamous today, was also used for a period of time in 18th century Tsarist Russia, before the area's development as a

center for coal mining and metallurgy (*ibidem*). It has been said that the industrialization that Donbas experienced during the 1860s led to the forging of a strong «sense of belonging» and community which in turn developed into a distinct Donbas identity (Stebelsky 2018: 35). This is despite the fact that many workers drawn to the area were not originally from the region (Wynn 2014: 3). Indeed the city of Donetsk was founded by Welsh business owner John Hughes and was originally known as Yuzovka (Hughsovka) before being renamed “Stalino” in 1924 and finally Donetsk in 1961 (Friedgut 1994).

During the late 1980s, the decline of the Soviet economy and deterioration of the regime meant that «the economic situation in the region [Donbas]... was perceived by local residents extremely painfully» (Vikhrov - Butchenko 2016). In 1989 the opportunity provided by *glasnost* led to Donetsk miners striking in response to what they perceived as a system unresponsive to the demands of workers. «The workers made it clear that their actions were aimed against the *apparat* [state bureaucracy], not against socialism» (Friedgut - Siegelbaum 1990: v). In stark contrast to scenes in 2014 of Donbas residents waving soviet flags and setting up “people’s republics”, the events of the Donbas miners strikes would see two representatives from Donetsk speak at the «Constituent Assembly of the People’s Movement of Ukraine» for perestroika in opposition to the regime². In terms of scale, the Donbas strike was one of the most significant in Soviet history, as «such a mass chain reaction of publicly discussed labour unrest had not been seen since the start of the 1920s» (Friedgut - Siegelbaum 1990: 22). The result of the strike was a purge of party officials involved in the operation of the mines, to be replaced with a new leadership that was sympathetic to the strikes; this led to the strikes as being dubbed «perestroika from below» (*ibid*: 31).

Donbas and the Collapse of the USSR

Following the events of 1989, the 1991 vote on Ukrainian independence from the Soviet Union, provides us with some interesting insights when comparing the outcome of voting in Donbas with other areas such as Kyiv and Western Ukraine. As might be expected, the Ternopil Oblast close to the city of Lviv had the highest number of “yes” votes for independence at 98.67%, with Lviv oblast close behind at 97.46%. The capital city of Kyiv came in at 92.88% in favor with Odesa in the South East at 85.38%. The closest margins by some way were to be found in Crimea with only 54.19% of people voting for independence. Donetsk and Luhansk, whilst registering lower support than cities in the west, still registered 83.90% and 83.86% in favor respectfully. Thus putting the voting in line with other eastern oblasts such as Kharkiv at 86.33% (Verkhovna Rada 2023). This again shows us how the relationship between the people of Donetsk and Luhansk were not out of step with the majority in Ukraine when it came to feelings about the Soviet Union.

² Vakhtang I., «Povstalyj Donbas», *Ukrains'kyj Tyzhden*, 14-III-2011, <<https://tyzhden.ua/povstalyj-donbas/>> (last visit 20-XII-2023).

It also demonstrates that drawing direct comparisons between Crimea and Donbas, as is common in both Western and Russian media, is perhaps less than useful due to the vastly different and unique histories of both regions. The idea that Donbas did not want to separate from Moscow rule is inherently not what the referendum results show us.

That being said, this does not mean that the historically distinct Donbas region did not experience problems following the breakup of the USSR. What would follow after independence, was met with «disappointment» as the region «underwent large-scale deindustrialization» (Vikhrov - Butchenko 2016). Not only was Donbas affected by «declining industrial and agricultural productivity», but also the effects of «hyperinflation, growing unemployment, poverty and shortages of fuel, consumer goods, and foodstuffs» (Flynn 1996: 342). This was not localized however to the east, but occurred as part of a wider economic crisis across Ukraine after the transition to a market economy, with GDP falling by 40.9% from the years 1990 to 1998 (Besrukov - Foigt 2000). Due to these economic problems, a significant sector of public opinion in Donbas, became increasingly frustrated with Ukraine's «policies, political orientation and configuration», including several of the central principles of the new state, including its unitary structure, «one official state language» and its economic direction (Flynn 1996: 342). Whilst the population of Donbas may have largely supported independence, the failure of the new administration to make a success of the situation was met with growing concern.

On the 27th March 1994, Donetsk oblast held a consultative referendum on the federalization of Ukraine and the adoption of Russian as an official language, coinciding with the first round of elections since independence (*ibidem*). Luhansk similarly held a referendum, however not on the question of federalization. Although there is very little in the way of English language information about this vote, some Russian news sources are available and report that 79.69% of people in Donetsk cast their ballots in favor of Ukraine adopting a «federal structure» and 87.16% supported making Russian an official language³. Leonid Kuchma, who would become the first elected president of independent Ukraine, and was largely supported in Donbas, also ran on a promise to upgrade the Russian language to an official one, which initially eased concerns in Donetsk and Luhansk. Although this position would later be dropped once Kuchma assumed office in July 1994 (Kuzio 2005: 37). The issue of a federalist Ukraine on the other hand, was more concerning and alarmed many in the west of the country who believed that it could threaten the country's territorial integrity⁴. Unlike in Crimea however, the results of the Donbas referendums were largely forgotten about over time, as they were only consultative in nature. The language and structural issues lay dormant for another twenty years.

³ Tret'yakova M. (2014), «Referendum o federalizatsii Donbassa: 20 let bor'by», *Aktual'nye kommentarii*, 9-XII, <<https://actualcomment.ru/referendum-o-federalizatsii-donbassa-20-let-borby.html>> (last visit 20-XII-2023); Gorodnenko Yu. (2014), «Istoriya ukrainskikh referendumov», *RIA Novosti Ukraina*, 15-III, <<https://rian.com.ua/analytics/20140315/341118157.html>> (last visit 20-XII-2023).

⁴ Jung M., «The Donbas Factor in the Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections», *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 27-III-1994, p. 3.

Ukrainian versus Russian Concepts of National Identity

One interesting point to consider briefly is the difference in the development of national identity in both Ukraine and Russia after the collapse of the USSR. Scholars focusing on the Russian Federation have frequently been divided over whether imperialist nationalism or ethno-nationalism is a more influential factor in the construction of this identity (Kolsto 2022: 118). In contrast however, Ukraine has been described as having developed more along lines of civic national identity, which is «substantially stronger» than that of ethnicity amongst the population (Shulman 2010: 53). This has been cited as a result of Ukraine pursuing «a top-down civic nation-building project since 1991» with «civic-oriented national identity» becoming especially evident since the Maidan Revolution of 2013/2014 (Barrington 2022: 365). Despite this, Taras Kuzio points to a lack of «consensus over how to relate to the “significant Other”» (Russia), in the development of the Ukrainian national identity after the fall of the Soviet Union (Kuzio 2001: 347). Considering the events to follow in Donbas, it is interesting to consider how Ukraine’s own perceptions of a unified national identity have clashed with that of Russia in the scenario of a kin-state (Russia) seeking to mobilise what it perceives to be its citizens in the near abroad. Ultimately, each state has its own nationalisms with pragmatic (anticipated) outcomes, with the co-development of both Ukraine and Russia as independent states eventually leading to the conflict of today.

The Novorossiya Concept and Collapse

Fast forward to the 11th of May 2014 and with Russian troops now occupying Crimea, the citizens of Donetsk and Luhansk once more returned to cast ballots in a referendum on the future of Donbas. It is here that we must look at two important understandings of the *Novorossiya* concept which informed much of the ideological drive behind these referendums and is connected to the rhetoric concerning ethnicity in the region. The first image «sustains an interpretation of *Novorossiya* as part and parcel of the Russian World», the geographical outline of *Novorossiya* aligning with 18th century Tsarist cartography. The second image capitalizes on a separate Donbas territorial imagery and encapsulates a socialist reading of *Novorossiya* as a «fortress» in the fight against global, Ukrainian and importantly Russian oligarchic capitalism’ (Suslov 2017: 207). In 2014 the Donbas rebels sent a clear message that they did «not see themselves as part of the Russian Federation» but as «autonomous players on the international arena» (*ibid.*: 208). What this state might look like however was unclear, as from its inception the concept of *Novorossiya* was informed by various competing ideologies from all across the political spectrum (Laruelle 2016). Where the borders of this new state would lie was also unclear, as realistically «if the restoration of historical *Novorossiya* was at stake» then the new state would extend well into Russia, to Rostov-On-Don and Kuban (*ibid.*: 210).

In addition to these conceptual problems, other logistical issues would lead to the eventual abandonment of the *Novorossija* idea and its replacement with a focus on the individual Donetsk and Luhansk projects. The result of the Ukrainian presidential election on the 25th May 2014 for example, saw substantial support for the Poroshenko government «and by extension for the idea of a united Ukraine, even in regions comprising the historical lands of *Novorossija*» (Suslov, 2017: 202). The idea that the Donbas revolution would spread to other eastern and south-eastern regions began to fade and the signing of the Minsk peace accords in 2015 also complicated matters as the treaty guaranteed the eventual return of the DNR/LNR Republics to Ukraine (Chatham House 2020). On 18th May 2015 Oleg Tsarev, the speaker of the *Novorossija* parliament, therefore proclaimed the «freezing» of *Novorossija* as a political entity, citing the Minsk accords⁵. The DNR and LNR were subsequently left in both a political and geographical limbo as «their emergence was never the rebellion’s goal, but an interim step towards transition, in which they got stuck» (Matveeva 2022: 418). As a cultural project the original *Novorossija* plan had stalled, however «the initial anarchic stage of mobilization», would gradually give way to «quasi-state structures», with governance ‘no longer revolutionary’ but ‘dominated by bureaucratic routine’ and importantly ‘with strong interests’ from the Russian security services (Matveeva 2022: 417).

In addition to the concept of *Novorossija*, an alternative and more wide reaching view would also begin to dominate within the Russian government as the *Novorossija* project collapsed; the idea that the whole of Ukraine itself was a «non-state», a concept infamously outlined in Vladimir Putin’s 2021 speech; «On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians». Here Putin would refer to the two countries as «essentially the same historical and spiritual space», separated through «deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity» (Putin 2021). In less diplomatic language, the Kremlin «political architect» Vladislav Surkov was quoted a year earlier, as saying «there is no nation [... Ukraine is not even a state» (Düben 2020). A key part of this concept being based on the history of the Kyivan Rus and the idea that Russia has ‘exclusive claims’ to the city of Kyiv as its ancestral homeland (Halperin 2006: 158). Therefore despite the Kremlin appearing to support the *Novorossija* project early on, this demonstrates a replacement and usurping of local Donbas objectives, with a geopolitical Kremlin ideology which calls into question the very existence of the Ukrainian state, not just the territorial boundary of a theoretical breakaway republic.

⁵ «Ukrainian Separatist Spokesman Denies Claims That Novorossiya is Dead», *Meduza*, 21-V-2015, <<https://meduza.io/en/news/2015/05/21/ukrainian-separatist-spokesman-denies-claims-that-novorossiya-is-dead>> (last visit 20-XII-2023).

Economy and Society in the People's Republics

The establishment of the People's Republics under the *Novorossija* project and the outbreak of the War in Donbas, created an undeniably 'systemic crisis' in the economy of the occupied areas (Polovyan *et al.* 2022). It should also be noted that despite some steps towards unification, the DNR and LNR always remained as separate entities, even enforcing «customs controls and taxes» on border crossings as a method of generating income (Matveeva 2022: 418). Luhansk, as the weaker of the two economies, was primarily against merger with the DNR as it feared losing out as a result of competition (*ibidem*). In addition to this, the position of the contact line meant that the rural areas of Donbas remained on the Ukrainian controlled side, therefore affecting food security in the republics (*ibid.*: 419). The thermal power stations which were supplied by the coal mines in occupied Donbas were also located in the government controlled areas (Kochanev 2020: 12). ,up until 2017, the People's Republics were still able to trade in goods such as coal with the rest of Ukraine, though this changed in 2017, when an economic blockade was effectively adopted by the Poroshenko government to stop the «trade in blood» (Marandici - Lesanu 2020: 344; Milakovsky 2018).

What followed was a period of oligarchic ownership, whereby industry was «nationalized» and handed over to «Kremlin-friendly Ukrainian businessmen» such as the now infamous Viktor Medvechuk, who would go on to be arrested and exchanged in a prisoner swap after the 2022 invasion (Matveeva 2022: 420; Skorkin 2023). Corruption during this period after 2017 was rife and the economy of the People's Republics collapsed even further, coinciding with population flight, strikes and a significantly reduced capacity for growth. «The idea that Donbas would become the viable example of the Russian World had failed» (Matveeva 2022: 410). In a bid to try and stabilize the economy, on 15th November 2021 Putin signed a decree of «humanitarian support» for Donbas, removing laws on imports and exports and allowing for the procurement of goods from the DNR/LNR on the same grounds as those from Russia⁶. This move by the Kremlin effectively abolished any corporate difference between companies in the DNR/LNR and those in Russia, allowing industry in Donbas to be bought out by Russian businesses and ending the oligarchic monopoly. It should be noted that this decree occurred at a time when Russia was increasing its buildup of troops on the Ukrainian border, in preparation for the «special military operation»⁷.

Economic problems were not the only ones faced by Donbas residents after 2014, however. Social and administrative issues stemming from the nature of the People's Republics and their relationship with the Russian Federation also served to make life more difficult. One primary issue was that of “passportisation” and citizenship. In 2019 the

⁶ «Putin Signs Decree on Humanitarian Support for People in Donetsk and Lugansk Republics», *TASS*, 15-XI-2021, <<https://tass.com/world/1361639>> (last visit 20-XII-2023).

⁷ Roth A., «Nato Chief Warns Russia Against 'Further Provocation' Amid Ukraine Tensions», *The Guardian*, 15-XI-2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/15/nato-chief-warns-russia-against-further-provocation-amid-ukraine-tensions>> (last visit 20-XII-2023).

Russian Federation began the process of allowing citizens in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics to apply for Russian passports and fast-track Russian citizenship (Warsaw Institute 2021). These residents however were not to be endowed with «full membership of the Russian state» and were effectively made «second class citizens» with difficulties accessing pensions, social benefits and voting (Burkhardt *et al.* 2022: 4). For example, the passports issued in Donbas did not document an individual's place of residence and were also not originally issued with a social security number (abbreviated in Russian as SNILS). This is required to access the digital “*Gosuslugi*” platform in order to register to vote. *Gosuslugi* being an online application allowing citizens to access government services. At one stage this required a trip to Rostov-on-Don in order to obtain a SNILS number, though later registration offices were set up in Donetsk and Luhansk (Burkhardt *et al.* 2022: 13). In addition to this, these DNR/LNR issued passports were not internationally recognized, therefore rendering them practically useless for foreign travel (*ibidem.* 6). For DNR/ LNR citizens, a full Russian passport could only be applied for on moving to the Russian Federation. This issue of passportisation indeed has echoes of Russian policy in Georgia 2008, where Russian passports were «given out en-masse to Georgian citizens of Russian nationality» before the start of military operations in the area (Munsch - Liebig, 2011: 6).

Therefore, on an administrative level for DNR and LNR residents, full union with Russia would theoretically address some of these issues, streamlining the passportisation and citizenship process. As we will see in polling from the region, majority public opinion in 2020 shifted for the first time in favor of joining Russia «without special autonomy»⁸. We might therefore begin to speculate that this was partly rooted in the want for equal citizenship on a level with the Russian Federation and frustration with the separatist bureaucratic processes. The initial Donbas rebellion had been «characterized by a strong ideological content, but it ran out of steam when the movement began to stall» (Matveeva 2022: 421). When the ideological aspects of the *Novorossiya* project fell away and were replaced with the everyday realities of life in an unrecognized and failing state, it might be logical that citizens would be drawn to options that would provide more stability. Thus opinion polls would shift in favour of full integration into Russia or re-integration with Ukraine, without the added complexities of «special autonomy». The chaos surrounding the annexation of the DNR and LNR republics as happened on 20th September 2022, however, was likely not what its citizens had in mind.

⁸ Toal G. - O'Loughlin J. - Sasse G. - Bakke K. M., «A New Survey of the Ukraine-Russia Conflict Finds Deeply Divided Views in the Contested Donbas Region», *The Washington Post*, 12-II-2021, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/12/new-survey-ukraine-russia-conflict-finds-deeply-divided-views-contested-donbas-region/>> (last visit 20-XII-2023).

Polling in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics

Now that we have a better understanding of the problems faced by the residents of the DNR and LNR, polling from the occupied areas can help us to uncover the issues that people considered to be the most important. It should be noted of course, that data collected from areas of conflict is rarely as trustworthy, however without access to other information these polls represent some of the few sources available. In addition to this, it is important not to conflate the “Russophone” and “ethnic Russian” population as the same group, as only from the perspective of the Russian government are these terms synonymous. Shortly after the Maidan revolution, a poll carried out by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), showed that separatism was in fact not the majority political opinion of the population of Donbas (self-identifying as ethnic Russian, Ukrainian or mixed). In fact only 27.5% of those in Donetsk and 30.3% of those in Luhansk responded positively to the question; «do you support the idea, that your region should secede from Ukraine and join Russia?» (KIIS 2014). Controlling for ethnicity, the largest bracket of ethnic-Russians at 45% did support separatism, however the inclusion of a mixed Russian/ Ukrainian identity leads to an overall ethnic-Russian population opposed to the idea (Giuliano 2018: 167). More concerning to the people of the DNR/LNR were «personal economic interests», with 44.3% of Donetsk residents indicating they were concerned with the «collapse of the Ukrainian economy» alongside 42.7% of those in Luhansk indicating the same (KIIS 2014). Again, when controlling for ethnicity, the only significant difference was in reactions to «foregoing trade with Russia» where 46% of ethnic Russians expressed concern, compared to only 23% of Ukrainians (Giuliano 2018: 165). For Elise Giuliano, this poll demonstrates that the Russian government’s «contention that ethnic Russians in Ukraine are a natural constituency for Putin’s policies» is a falsehood (*ibid.*: 163). In the years since Ukrainian independence, Ukraine has called into question «popular attitudes» of a commitment to a «Russian World», shifting away from «ethnicity as a salient personal identity» (*ibid.*: 164).

Polling that occurred longitudinally in both 2016 and then 2019 also helps shed light onto how attitudes towards ethnicity in the region developed throughout this period. In 2016 the number of respondents within the occupied territories that indicated they felt «more Russian» since the start of the War in Donbas was only 3% and only reached 6% by 2019 (Sasse 2019: 6). Similarly, 45% of people polled in 2016 stated that their feelings on ethnic identity had «not changed», though this fell to 32.4% by 2019, mainly due to an increase in the «more strongly both category» at 7.3% (*ibid.*: 8). Despite the category of ethnic Russian self-identification remaining fairly stable, from 2016 to 2019 the number of respondents answering that the DNR/LNR should join Russia «without special autonomy status» increased from 11.4% to 18.3%. Although, interestingly, the number wishing to rejoin Ukraine «without special autonomy status» also increased from 20.6% to 23.5% (*ibid.*: 12). Due to the economic and social problems occurring in Donbas during this time, this shift might therefore reinforce the theory that the desire to integrate fully into Russia was rooted in a longing for increased stability rather than in a particular ideological drive.

During this time specifically, for example, the Ukrainian blockade on goods from the DNR/LNR was causing major economic upset and there was still yet to be an attempt by Russia to issue passports in the region. By March 2019, 46% of people polled would indicate support for joining Russia (both with and without autonomous status), showing that the number was steadily increasing (*ibidem*).

Only in 2020 however, did polling indicate a tip of the scales in Russia's favour, as a study carried out with the help of KIIS and the Levada Centre indicated that by October 2020 «over half» (52%) of respondents in the DNR/LNR now favored union with Russia (with or without autonomous status). Therefore, the more the war continued and the more «partition» endured, the wider became the divide, suiting the «interests of political elites both in the DNR/LNR and Russia» (Toal *et al.* 2021). The failure of the cultural project of *Novorossija*, and the bureaucratic difficulties of belonging to a separatist state, coupled with an economy battered by war and corruption, therefore, gradually pushed the residents of Donbas towards any option they thought would provide stability. Considering the fact that Russia had gradually been further integrating the DNR and LNR through measures such as the economic «humanitarian» assistance bill and the 2019 fast track citizenship scheme, it would stand to reason that polling of citizens in the self-proclaimed republics would document a shift in favour of union with Russia. The question, therefore, is whether the ethnic makeup of Donbas truly drove a desire to be united with the Russian Federation, or whether this shift was rather rooted in economic and social problems, and reframed in the context of ethnic grievances by the Russian government. Was the passportisation process, for example, a genuine attempt to reintegrate «Russians» on the near-abroad or was it merely a ploy which would allow Russia to later insist that it was acting to protect its «own citizens» from a purported «genocide» in Donbas? (Burkhardt *et al.* 2022: 4).

Did Ethno-Nationalism in Donbas Contribute to the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine?

We have seen that ethnic cleavages within Donbas, although present, were not generally problematic in the past, up until the Maidan Revolution. Major concerns following 2014 were also generally economic and, in addition to this, in the period 2016 to 2019 the number of DNR residents who felt more strongly «both Ukrainian and Russian» actually increased by 7.3% (Sasse 2019: 8). This does not therefore point to ethnicity as being the strongest driver of identity in the occupied regions. Moreover, if ethnicity was the most important factor influencing Donbas residents to pursue a union with Russia, then surely we would expect at least some form of conflict with ethnic Ukrainians within the occupied territories. However, this is not something which has been reported. In addition to this, the «territorial boundaries of the state» or the borders of *Novorossija* have been internally contested with many inside the DNR/ LNR not being able to define where it begins and ends (Wimmer 2013: 150). The historical area of *Novorossija* extends well into the Russian Federation, so rather than the “boundaries” being defined in terms of Ukrainian versus

historically ethnic Russian territory, they could also be seen from a Russia versus *Novorossija* perspective as well. The fact that until 2020 the majority in the People's Republics also supported the terms of the Minsk agreements and their stipulation that the DNR/LNR would eventually return to Ukraine, also demonstrates that the ethnic framing of the conflict is problematic (Sasse 2019: 12).

This late shift in opinion occurring in 2020, suggests that other factors we have mentioned, such as poor job opportunities, food insecurity, corruption and problems accessing services are likely to be the drivers behind favoring union with Russia. If the ethnicity narrative was correct, then surely a majority would have supported separatism from day one. Similarly, the ethnicity explanation fails to explain the attitudes of the minority of Ukrainians who did want to join Russia from the very beginning. In one Vice News interview with anti-Maidan protesters for example, a lady self-identifying as Ukrainian, tells reporters that the crowd «came here because they have reached boiling point. We are Ukrainian. I'm Ukrainian, here's Lila, she is Ukrainian too. But I want to be with Russia» (Vice News 2014). In the same way, it should be noted that Donbas voted almost unanimously for Yanukovich in previous elections, requiring the votes of ethnic Ukrainians as well as ethnic Russians, perhaps again reflecting the importance of more regional issues over identity (Osipian - Osipian 2006: 495). In a separate interview in the same video, another protestor can be heard expressing concerns over the future of the mines in the region, reinforcing the idea that people feared the economic consequences of Maidan rather than a «genocide» of ethnic-Russians (Vice News 2014). Over the next eight years these concerns would become exacerbated, leading more people to adopt the anti-Kyiv position.

Whilst it is clear that some separatist elites did make use of ethno-nationalist discourse in attempts to mobilise the population, it is far more likely that the majority of people were driven by other concerns such as personal finances and trade with Russia. The question therefore must be asked as to how Russia has been able to successfully present a narrative surrounding the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, that sounds so similar to Wimmer's description of states acting «to protect co-nationals living across a state border from ethnic discrimination», protecting their «ethnic brothers» (2013: 117). What we might say therefore is that the concept of ethno-nationalism in Donbas did contribute to the 2022 invasion, but only so much as Russia could fabricate it as a means to justify its actions. Putin's now infamous speech on the «unity of the Russian and Ukrainian people», for example, was able to tap into already established myths in Russia surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union and the history of Tsarist Russia and Kyivan Rus (Putin 2021). As we will see, this was made easier by the participation of far-right groups in the Maidan Revolution and War in Donbas, that could be pointed to as “proof” that Ukraine posed a threat to its Russian population. However, in reality, for six years after 2014 much of the population of the DNR and LNR, both Russian and Ukrainian had wished to re-integrate into Ukraine as per the Minsk accords.

Neo Nazis in Ukraine – The Visibility of the Far Right in Shaping a Separatist Narrative

Writing in 1998, Taras Kuzio reinforces our assessment that ethnic divisions in Ukraine would be unlikely to lead to separatism, stating that «most outside observers, both in Russia and the West, mistakenly assume that Russian-speakers are likely to be separatists. In actual fact, only a small minority of Russians in eastern Ukraine regard Russia as their ‘homeland’» (1998: 80). In addition to this, Kuzio emphasises that «factors which usually spark ethnic conflict [...] are largely absent from Ukraine» (*ibid.*: 75-77); «The only scenario one could envisage of separatism taking root in the Donbas would be in the highly unlikely event of radical right nationalists obtaining a majority within parliament and/or, more importantly, taking control of the presidency» (*ibid.*: 82). It is in this line that we might find the answer to the question of how Russia was able to construct a narrative based on ethnicity, as the visibility of far right groups in Ukraine undoubtedly increased in the time following the Maidan Revolution. Despite lacking any sort of significant representation in the Verkhovna Rada, the participation of football “Ultras” in Maidan and the formation of groups such as Right Sector and later the Azov Battalion undoubtedly alarmed some in Donbas.

Throughout the course of the Maidan Revolution, participants were drawn from all sectors of Ukrainian life, the majority of which came out in protest of Viktor Yanukovich’s failure to sign an European Union association agreement, leading to the term «Euromaidan» protests (Shevsky 2022: 852), a contraction of Europe and *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* (“Independence Square”) in Kyiv. Despite this, media reports both in Russia and the West drew attention to a contingent of protesters that appeared to have far-right beliefs. This included groups such as the newly formed Right Sector, which was formed in November 2013 «as a loose collection of extra parliamentary minigroups, from an ultraconservative and partly neo-Nazi fringe» (Shekhovtsov - Umland 2014: 59). Also present were members of the far-right Svoboda party, led by Oleh Tyahnybok (Ishchenko 2016: 454). Andrew Wilson, however, states that the number of far-right activists involved in the protests is often overrepresented, blaming infiltration by provocateurs pretending to be nationalists who staged fights with the police (Wilson 2014: 69). «The whole point of Maidan», he states, was that there was «no overarching big idea» and that «even Right Sector» was «defined more by the desire for direct action than by nationalism» (*ibid.*: 70). Regardless of the actual role of far-right groups in the Maidan Revolution, «Ukraine’s radical right-wingers» were «fervently featured in the Kremlin’s massive international media campaign against the Euromaidan protest». Even amongst Western media outlets, Ukrainian nationalists became depicted as key players in the unfolding events (Shekhovtsov - Umland 2014: 58)⁹.

⁹ Whelan B. (2014), «Ukraine: Far-Right Extremists at Core of ‘Democracy’ Protest», *Channel 4*, 24-I, <<https://www.channel4.com/news/kyiv-svoboda-far-right-protests-right-sector-riot-police>> (last visit 20-XII-2023).

These media portrayals were not helped by clashes in East Ukraine between Maidan and anti-Maidan protesters, such as the events of May 2nd 2014 in Odesa. In one of the bloodiest days of the revolution, anti-Maidan activists barricaded themselves inside the Trade Unions Building, which was subsequently set ablaze, leading to the death of 42 people (Jones 2020: 30). The Russian press immediately «began presenting the conflagration as a massacre by Ukrainian nationalists» despite counter claims that petrol bombs from either side could have started the fire (Coynash 2021). For Deborah Jones, May 2nd is crucial in understanding «Vladimir Putin’s claim that Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a “special operation” to “denazify” the country and protect Russians and Russian speakers from “humiliation and genocide”» (Jones 2020: 30; Dudko 2022: 134). The events in Odesa could be portrayed in the media as a physical example of ethnic Russians under threat and used as a tool to encourage outrage in Russia and mobilisation in east-Ukraine. Anger over the deaths soon reached other cities, with protestors in Donetsk heard chanting «we will not forgive Odesa» in news footage from the time (Vice News 2014). Although of course this cannot be seen as evidence that these same protestors viewed the events in the same ethnic light as the media.

The events of Maidan undoubtedly concerned people in Donbas, having the potential to alienate them politically with the ousting of the Party of Regions and leading to uncertainty over protections of the Russian language (Suny 2022). As polling shows, however, the perceived threat from groups such as Right Sector, were not initially a major concern for those in Donetsk and Luhansk, with only 19.1% of people polled across the South East in April 2014 claiming to be concerned about the «growth of radicalism and nationalism». Again, this is compared to 39.2% of people in the region who claimed the «collapse of the Ukrainian economy» was their greatest concern (KIIS 2014). Despite this, media framing and amplification of far-right participation in the Maidan Revolution and War in Donbas allowed the Russian Federation to successfully present the situation in East Ukraine as one characterised by ethnic grievances. This could be seen in both domestic media and media intended for a foreign audience such as Russia Today (Dougherty 2014: 22). In addition to this, Western media outlets would also pick up the story, overrepresenting the role of far-right groups and contributing to a narrative that questioned the legitimacy of the revolution. Over the next eight years, the Russian media would regularly continue to develop the narrative of a «Nazi» coup in Kyiv, and ethnic Russians and Russophones under threat in Donbas. As we will see, this media framing would eventually develop far enough that it would be used as justification for the 2022 full scale invasion of Ukraine.

Russian Media Framing of Events Until 2022

Whether through contested history or pure instrumentalism, Russia’s perception of Donbas has appeared at times completely at odds with the region’s own perception of itself. In order to understand this, it is necessary to bring in the concepts of Russia’s own

domestic nationalism. The well-known Russia expert Pal Kolstø notes two important trends when viewing the «trajectory of nationalism under Putin». Firstly that «ethno-nationalism moves centre stage» and secondly that «since the turn of the millennium, leaders have been able to tap into and exploit nationalist feelings for their own ends» (Kolstø 2022: 113). With the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Kolstø sees Putin as donning «the nationalist mantle» himself, pushing out nationalist opposition. The Kremlin «tapping into and draining societal nationalism for its own ends» (Kolstø 2022: 136). Applied to Donbas, a similar instrumentalist use of nationalism can be seen, that is that «self-interested elites» can use nationalism to «mobilise their respective clientele», for example along issues of language or «homeland territory» (Brown 2004: 281). The difference however with regards to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine is that the Russian population (through the «special military operation») is being mobilised in the defence of a homeland territory which is not actually part of Russia, and was not imminently under any sort of threat. For Duvold and Sunvisson, this can be viewed through the lens of exported nationalism and the return of aggressive kin-state politics to Europe (2015: 19). Prior to 2014 the Donbas never saw «ethnic, linguistic or religious (sectarian) conflicts [...] nor did the population consistently manifest strong pro-Russian or pro-Union sentiments» (Kuromiya 2019). The Kremlin-controlled state media, however, would report a very different story.

One interesting source on the topic comes from the leaked emails of Vladislav Surkov a man often cited as the architect of Russian political technology (Hosaka 2019). What these emails show us is that rather than gaining traction through local support amongst ethnic Russians in Donbas, fringe separatist groups progressed largely due to the assistance of the Russian government. On 13th March 2014, for example, a leaked report from Konstantin Goloskokov states that a «coordinating council of pro-Russian actions consisting of 50 people» had been formed, and that they suggested «supplying activists with equipment for protective and offensive operations», as well as occupying «strategically important city objects» (Hosaka 2019: 757). Surkov's task therefore was to «compromise the Ukrainian government» and to disguise the Russian aggression of Ukraine as «a civil war» (*ibid.*: 765). The emails suggest that «Surkov occasionally used [Donbas] nationalists to create a myth and stage enthusiasm for *Novorossija*», as well as suggesting using social media to increasingly spread the nationalist message of Donbas (*ibid.*: 760). This has been seen by some as an attempt at co-opting nationalism beyond Russia's own borders, in places where it doesn't really exist (Mejias - Vokuev 2017: 1028). After the re-capture of Slovyansk by Ukraine, Surkov also makes reference to a new propaganda tack of «the imagined "Donbas", that desperately wants to secede from Ukraine» (Hosaka 2019: 763). These leaked emails, although dealing with events from around 2014 to 2015, therefore give us an insight into the framing that Russia was already applying to Donbas directly after the Maidan revolution.

Russian TV news reports and talk shows would increasingly recount «phantasmic atrocities [...] and "genocide" of Russians in East Ukraine», as throughout the period after 2014 the theme of persecution towards ethnic Russians and Russophone would continue

to be developed (Fedor 2015: 2; Giuliano 2018: 163). Indeed a trope of Russian propaganda since the invasion, has become the phrase «where were you for the last eight years? [Где вы были восемь лет?]

This is in reference to the supposed idea that the world ignored the plight of the people of Donbas who suffered at the hands of the Ukrainian military and «neo-nazi» groups (Epuryanu 2022). This is despite the fact that the vast majority of casualties in the War in Donbas occurred during the first year of fighting, when separatist groups and even Russian regular forces were involved in heavy clashes (HRMMU 2022). This focus however, on eight years of supposed «ethnic cleansing» and Russians fighting for their very existence, also ties in with the imagery of the Great Patriotic War, resonating with «existing features of post-soviet Russian war memory» and the struggle against fascism (Fedor 2015: 10). This therefore becomes a powerful tool when it comes to the framing and justification of the 2022 invasion, as it sees the conflict as an almost continuation of the fight against «Nazism». This also ties in with several other propaganda tropes including Putin’s statement that «we were not given a chance to do otherwise», referring to the idea that the «special operation» was a last resort to defend the Russian people¹⁰. This is perhaps summarized in the ever present «Своих не бросаем» (“we don’t leave our own”) posters around Russian cities (Epuryanu 2022).

Do Russians Believe the Nationalist Framing?

If we make the claim therefore that ethno-nationalism within Donbas was not a leading cause for the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the question must therefore be asked how successful this Russian reframing has been to its domestic audience. At the start of the war in March 2022, a joint poll between the Levada Centre and Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA), found that a plurality of Russians (43%) believed the invasion was carried out to protect and defend ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine. The highest support for the campaign was found amongst those who trusted traditional news media to provide them with information (87%) (Smeltz *et al.* 2022: 4-5). This corroborates the findings of a recent Levada Centre poll taken in March 2023, with the «highest level of support for the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine» amongst those «who trust TV as the main source of news» (79%) (Levada Centre, 2023). A «critical factor in Russian attitudes» therefore «is likely the muzzling of independent media» and subsequent «firehose of falsehood» projected by the state (Smeltz *et al.* 2022: 7; Paul - Matthews 2016: 7). Through framing the «special military operation» as an act of self-defence and defence of ethnic Russians in East Ukraine, the Russian government was likely able to mobilise its population far more in support of its actions.

¹⁰ «Address by the President of the Russian Federation», 24-II-2022, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>> (last visit 20-XII-2023).

Conclusion

The War in Ukraine has shifted the geopolitical landscape of the world, leading to untold destruction and the displacement of 8.2 million people (UNHCR 2023). Whilst scholars seek to understand the wider picture of events in Ukraine, it is necessary to understand the region of Donbas and counter untruths regarding its population. Far from Russian claims of «eight years of genocide», what we have found throughout this research, is that the people of Donbas have faced «eight years of a failing economy, corruption and problems with passportisation». In addition to this, it should also be noted that until 2020, with a very close majority of 52%, the majority of those in Donbas still favoured re-unification with Ukraine (Toal *et al.* 2021). Thus economic and social grievances that existed, were cleverly abused by the powerful and more resourceful Russian state, in a situation where the host state of Ukraine did not have the resources to address these issues. The Russian government, manufacturing a narrative for its own domestic audience, whereby the only option left was for the Putin regime to activate the «special military operation» in order to defend ethnic Russians and Russophones in the DNR and LNR. This in turn manufactured consent for the 2022 invasion amongst the Russian population, allowing the Kremlin to act without fear of major opposition. As time goes on, however, and with the war now creeping onto Russian soil, it remains to be seen whether this narrative over Donbas will hold.

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