How ‘eastern Ukraine’ was lost

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Nearly two years after the outbreak of fighting, nearly 9,000 people have died in eastern Ukraine. To understand how this war ends, we need to understand how it began. ***Русский***

During spring and summer 2014, ‘eastern Ukraine’ as an imagined entity ceased to exist. The cities of Donetsk and Luhansk became the capitals of the self-proclaimed ‘People’s Republics’, directly experiencing the horror of armed conflict.

Kharkiv, however, avoided this fate, and Dnipropetrovsk emerged as a symbol of loyalty to the Ukrainian state—the ‘heart of Ukraine’. The following question naturally arose: why did the cities of eastern Ukraine take such different trajectories? Why didn’t Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk become Donetsk and Luhansk?

For me, this question is key to understanding what has happened in Ukraine in recent years. Long before parts of eastern Ukraine were turned into a fully-fledged war zone, the image of ‘two Ukraines’ became extremely popular in Ukrainian and international media.

It divided the country between east and west, into ‘ethnic zones’ according to the language of everyday communication.

This simplified scheme traditionally gave the ‘east’ four regional capitals, the big industrial towns of Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv and Luhansk. In the post-war Soviet Union, the first three became homes to millions of people, and Luhansk – 500,000. Here, people predominantly speak Russian. Both in 2004 and 2010, the majority of voters in these regions (albeit with a significant discrepancy between them) chose Viktor Yanukovych, a native of the Donbas, as their president.

Most answers as to why Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk did not become Donetsk and Luhansk cites the Donbas’ ‘specific identity’ (usually described as ‘Soviet’) as a causal factor. And depending on the ideological preferences of the author writing about it, this identity is evaluated in either disparaging or complimentary tones.

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Yet in both cases, the ‘Donestk People’s Republic’ (DNR) and ‘Luhansk People’s Republic’ (LNR) are often taken as ciphers for the population of the region as a whole. More worryingly, physical violence appears as the necessary consequence of Donbas residents’ dissatisfaction with Kyiv’s language or economic policies.

The literature on Maidan, annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbas continues to lack a factually accurate description of what happened in the centre and the regions. Instead, researchers have fallen prey to the temptation to ideologise and idealise when explaining the motives and reasons behind the events of 2014.

In this article, then, I’d like to raise a few questions that I hope will help shape serious future research:

namely, is the road from political sentiment to physical violence really so direct? Can ‘identity’ explain the war in the Donbas, and how can we accurately describe society’s moods in a situation where the state loses its monopoly on violence? Finally, what role did local and central elites play in the region’s descent into war?

Do you remember how everything started?

The most important date in the timeline of how Ukraine lost control over Donetsk and Luhansk is 6 April, 2014. On that day, several thousand protesters occupied the Donetsk regional administration building, raising the Russian state flag above it. The local police force guarding the building offered little resistance.

This was the second time the Donetsk regional government’s headquarters was occupied. In early March 2014, police had to remove supporters of an extraordinary session of the regional council after they occupied it for several days. (Apparently, they had found a bomb in the assembly room.)

But it wasn’t the repeat occupation that mattered. Rather, it was Kyiv’s refusal to retake the building by force that would have consequences. The *spetsnaz* unit sent to clear the building, headed up by police general Vitaly Yarema, vice prime minister at the time, refused to storm it.

On the same day, a crowd (sources on both sides say up to 5,000) stormed the Luhansk branch of Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU). Women and teenagers led the charge, and the police moved aside while SBU officers held the building for six and a half hours.

April 2014: the Donetsk regional administration building is stormed. CC-BY-SA Andrew Butko / WikimediaCommons.

By evening on 6 April, having received no support whatsoever, the SBU men capitulated, and the protesters made the SBU armoury (which housed 1,000 Kalashnikov rifles) their first port of call.

An armed police unit was dispatched to liberate the building together with SBU chief Valentyn Nalyvaichenko. Just like in Donestk, though, the operation failed to materialise.

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In April 2014, then, the Ukrainian state finally lost its monopoly on violence in the two biggest cities of the Donbas. This rejection of force was later explained via the general disorientation following the loss of Crimea and concerns that blood might be spilled. The former head of the Luhansk SBU Oleksandr Petrulevych has asserted that the people behind the occupation of his former office were actually counting on the SBU to open fire on the protesters. This would have served, Petrulevich claimed, as a reason for Russian 'peace-keeping forces' to enter the region.

This operation, with its elements of improvisation and spontaneity, to seize key administrative buildings in Donestk and Luhansk became possible due to the following:

1. the 'neutral' position of the region's ruling class (namely, local oligarchs Rinat Akhemtov and Aleksandr Efremov)
2. the passive behaviour of law enforcement (bear in mind the discrediting of the police during Maidan, and their disorientation following the change of government)
3. the state's gradual loss of control over the border with Russia
4. the indecisiveness of the new Kyiv government, stemming not only from fears of further violence, but also the lack of the post-Maidan elites' political or economic interest in the Donbas (the electorate of which was predominantly against Maidan, and where local oligarchs closely connected to Yanukovych regime were in control of businesses)

Meanwhile, let's not forget that Donetsk and Luhansk had their own 'EuroMaidans'. In March and April 2014, demonstrations in support of a united Ukraine gathered thousand protesters in both towns. However, these civic initiatives could not change the balance of power in the region.

The Donetsk Maidan was weak for several reasons: its largely youthful, 'underground' character, a tangible absence of media coverage (both locally and on a national level) and the inability of activists to formulate a compelling socio-economic message. Indeed, participants of the Luhansk Maidan (including the philosopher Oleksandr Eremenko in his book *Reflections on the Luhansk Vendée*) have written about the sense of having been abandoned by Kyiv.

By the end of 2015, the Donbas' most determined adherents to 'de-oligarchisation' were dead

That said, the anti-Maidan protests in Donetsk didn't match Kyiv neither in terms of numbers, nor determination. These demonstrations, taking place largely in March 2014, combined a rejection of the new Kyiv government and its 'European integration' course, pro-Russian moods of various casts and, crucial for the Donbas, strong anti-oligarch rhetoric.

Where the war wasn't

Further west, the region of Dnipropetrovsk does not share a border with Russia. More importantly, the Party of Regions, the political conglomeration connected to president Yanukovych and 'the Donetsk clan', never enjoyed a political or economic monopoly here, as in neighbouring Donetsk or Luhansk. And as crowds gathered under pro-Russian slogans further east in spring 2014, the situation in Dnipropetrovsk developed in a completely opposite fashion.

Like Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk had its own small-scale Maidan, but the overwhelming majority of city residents did not take part in mass protests. On 26 January 2014, a group of *titushki*, young men paid by Yanukovych officials to threaten and disrupt demonstrations, beat up pro-Maidan protesters under the walls of the regional administration building. Adding insult to injury, several of these Maidan protesters were then arrested by the police.

Five weeks later, on 3 March, oligarch Igor Kolomoisky took the post of Dnipropetrovsk governor. After all, Kolomoisky's business empire, which covered the whole of the country, including Ukraine's largest bank, oil and gas industry assets, mass media (TV channel 1+1), an airline, had been born in Dnipropetrovsk.

2 March 2014: close to 3,000 people rally outside the regional state administration in Dnipropetrovsk in support of Ukraine's territorial integrity. (c) ukrafoto / Demotix. All rights reserved.

Together with his closest councillors Gennady Korban and Boris Filatov, Kolomoisky not only made political capital by saving the city from war, but used this emergence of Dnipropetrovsk as a 'pro-Ukrainian' city to protect his business interests. Government buildings were not stormed in Dnipropetrovsk. In their many interviews, though, the Kolomoisky team admitted provocatively to using every method they could, including ones hardly considered legal,

to suppress separatism in their region.

At the same time, Serhii Taruta was appointed governor of the Donetsk region. Another heavyweight, Taruta had headed up Industrial Union of Donbas, one of Ukraine's largest metals companies, since 1995. Indeed, according to Taruta, Dnipropetrovsk did not have to face the same kind of threat as the Donbas. Only Donetsk and Luhansk experienced the 'diversion scenario', in which activists fresh from the annexation of Crimea coordinated events on the ground in eastern Ukraine. As Kolomoisky himself admitted in one interview: "Of course, Dnipropetrovsk wasn't a flashpoint like Donetsk or Luhansk."

In any case, in March 2014, Donbas leaders Rinat Akhmetov and Aleksandr Efremov, unlike Kolomoisky, opted to act as mediators between the new Kyiv government and the regions where their business interests were most concentrated. Most likely, Akhmetov and Efremov underestimated the Russian factor and the risk of a fully armed conflict breaking out.

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Akhmetov, widely believed to be Ukraine's richest man, initially turned down the post of governor, criticising the idea of storming the occupied administration buildings and trying to negotiate with armed groups. On 20 May 2014, Akhmetov initiated a civic action 'For a peaceful Donbas', in which both factories and cars blared their horns in rejection of the force used by the self-proclaimed 'Donetsk People's Republic'.

In the end, Akhmetov's action stood out as a belated act of desperation rather than an attempt to save the

region from its descent into war. The town of Slovyansk had already been under the control of Igor Girkin, a Russian citizen, for more than a month after armed men took control of the administration buildings on 12 April. And on 6 July 2014, Girkin's column of vehicles made its retreat to Donetsk unhindered, finally making it the capital of the DNR.

The regions of Donesk and Luhansk are not alone in sharing a border with Russia. The closest town is, in fact, Kharkiv—hence its status as capital of Soviet Ukraine from 1919 to 1934. And it wasn't by chance that Kharkiv hosted a large-scale meeting for the Party of Regions, the 'Congress of Deputies of South East Ukraine', on 22 February, 2014. (Yanukovych, freshly fugitive from Kyiv, was supposed to give a speech, but didn't.) 1 March saw the first attempt to seize the Kharkiv regional administration building, and the Russian flag hung above it for 45 minutes before it was taken down.

One month later on 6 April, simultaneously with the events in Donetsk and Luhansk, anti-Maidan protesters occupied the Kharkiv regional administration building. By morning, though, it was clear: a *spetsnaz* unit from Vynnytsya emptied the building in 15 minutes without a single shot, arresting 65 people in the process.

1 March 2014: protesters storm Kharkiv regional administration building. (c) Ruslan Stepanov / Demotix. All rights reserved.

We don't know what would have happened in Kharkiv if those in charge had not stormed the occupied buildings, as in Donetsk and Luhansk. Indeed, the strong personal ties of the people in charge of the operation—Arsen Avakov, the interior minister, and Stepan Poltorak, the head of the National Guard—are likely at play here. While Poltorak is the former dean of the Kharkiv Military Academy, Avakov is originally from Kharkiv and acted as the region's governor under Viktor Yushchenko.

Given the constant (and violent) confrontation between local Maidan and anti-Maidan protests, Kharkiv stands out. This showdown made the 'popular revolt' scenario impossible. There was also the increasingly important role of football fans in the Kharkiv Maidan (just as in Dnipropetrovsk and Odessa, but not Donetsk or Luhansk). These fans were not only organised, but ready to put down revolt with violence.

There were other factors at play here. Kharkiv did not have to face activists from Crimea, weapons drops or diversion groups. Thanks to the efforts of Avakov and Poltorak, the Ukrainian military blockaded Kharkiv military airport; the *spetsnaz* from other regions remained loyal to the new government for a short period.

Finally, the mayor of Kharkiv, who can 'change without ever changing' as Peter Pomerantsev puts it, took a position loyal to the Ukrainian state. Gennady Kernes, a former businessman who was elected mayor of Kharkiv on a Party of Regions ticket in 2010, may have previously been spotted at 'separatist' events, but the balance of power eventually swayed him in spring 2014.

Donbas worldwide

Without a doubt, the moods of local populations and their specific histories played a role in all of the above. The rapidly developing coal industry defined the demographics of the Donbas throughout the 20th century. In turn, this socio-economic dynamic gave rise to a cultural identity: a mix of freedom and force, a characteristic respect for labour (particularly miners) and physical power, a rejection of ethnic exclusivity, a tolerant attitude to prison (explaining, for instance, why Yanukovych was not at all seen as an outcast despite his two terms in prison), a high percentage of pensioners and weak 'creative class'.

The region formed its own sense of local pride and loyalty, as espoused in popular sayings such as 'The Donbas chooses its own' (*Donbass vybiraet svoikh*), 'The Donbas keeps its word' (*Donbass porozhyank ne gonit*), 'You can't bring the Donbas to its knees' (*Donbass ne postavit' na koleni*).

Summer 2015: shelling continues in Donetsk suburbs. (c) Celestino Arce / Demotix. All rights reserved.

However, just like any other region of Ukraine, we should neither idealise, nor demonise the Donbas. Instead, the heterogeneity of Donbas—with its industrial agglomerations, Ukrainian-speaking peasant regions in the north and the particular seaside parts in the south—should be taken into consideration. We should also take into account the Donbas' characteristically hostile and cautious attitude to Kyiv (and any other supraregional power), as well as its sensitivity to the

discriminatory rhetoric that Ukrainian politicians and public figures have permitted themselves to use when speaking about 'residents of the Donbas'.

This does not mean that 'residents of the Donbas' bear collective responsibility for the transformation of their region into a conflict zone. The fact that Maidan was a minority movement in Donetsk does not mean, for instance, that the majority of people supported accession to Russia. The lack of understanding and frustration at Kyiv did not signal a readiness to take arms.

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Emotions, including political ones, and physical violence are simply two different things. Specific situations such as foreign occupations or power vacuums are what lead to popular violence.

This is precisely what happened in Donetsk and Luhansk. The vast majority of residents chose a position of passive survival or indifference to the political situation, which could be summed by the phrase 'as long as there's no shooting'.

Preliminary conclusions

The events of spring 2014 developed so quickly that, at first glance, insignificant nuances played a defining role, alongside the personalities of key players, their decisions on the ground and unforeseen combinations of circumstances. Neither Maidan, nor anti-Maidan were politically homogenous or static phenomena. Their dynamics still await close anthropological and sociological analysis, just as the behaviour of local business and political elites in various regions of Ukraine.

On 22 January, 2014, Serhii Nigoyan and Mykhailo Zhyznevsky were shot on Hrushevsky Street in central Kyiv. For the first time in independent Ukraine's history, people had been killed during a mass protest. On 18-20 February, more than 80 protesters and 17 police officers were shot and killed on Maidan and its surrounding streets.

Physical violence soon took to the regions. On 13 March, Dmytro Chernyavsky, an activist with the local branch of the far right organisation Svoboda, died from stab wounds suffered in an attack by anti-Maidan supporters. Two days later, two anti-Maidan protesters were killed during a nighttime shootout near the Kharkiv office of the far right Patriot of Ukraine organisation. On 2 May, 48 people died following the clashes in Odessa, the majority of whom were anti-Maidan.

Kyiv, February 2014: impromptu memorial in remembrance of protesters killed in clashes.

The war on the territory of Donetsk and Luhansk regions arose through a combination of circumstances. Most importantly: the behaviour of local elites and paralysis of the police, Russian intervention (including military) and the indecisiveness, mistakes and miscalculations of Kyiv. In the cases of Dnipropetrovsk and

Kharkiv, both the decisive and unmistakably pro-Ukrainian actions of local business and political elites and the tangibly reduced activity of pro-Russian forces were key factors for keeping these regions in Ukraine.

The fact that the Donetsk elites avoided direct action in the initial phase of the conflict in March-April 2014 played a decisive role, both intensifying the disorientation of the local population and shifting the situation into a military gear.

The Ukrainian state's loss of its monopoly on violence in the Donbas was preceded by its disorientation in the wake of Crimea, where the post-Maidan government offered no real resistance to Russia's annexation of the peninsula. The anti-Maidan protests made their claims for separation from Ukraine only after the Crimean events. Nevertheless, not one elected institution of power in Donetsk or Luhansk obeyed the demands to call an extraordinary session, nor did they issue decisions on the illegitimacy of Kyiv (following the Crimean example, this was the initial demand made by the leaders of anti-Maidan).

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The failure to create 'People's Republics' in Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Odessa made the 'Novorossiya' project, the borders of which were announced by Vladimir Putin during his 'Direct Line' show on 17 April, 2014, far more difficult to realise. At the same time, the escalation of the situation in the DNR and LNR was a direct result of their open borders with Russia. As Aleksandr Khodakovsky, the leader of the DNR's 'Security Council' put it, this was a "question of our survival".

Thus, a swathe of the Donbas was turned into a new 'conflict zone', but into a time bomb for Ukraine. The war became part of everyday life like the information and financial blockade, the difficulties of entering and leaving the area and the shelling of populated areas by both sides. According to the UN, nearly 9,000 people have died in this war, more than 20,000 people have been wounded and more than 2.5m people have fled their homes.

We can (and must) argue about the correct definition of this conflict. But we cannot close our eyes to the fact that, over the course of a year, many people have come to see it as a civil war.

Oleksandr Eremenko, the Luhansk philosopher mentioned earlier, expressed the following concern about the possibility that 'civil war in the Donbas could well form a new social and ethnic community': "If this community comes about, most likely it will be not Ukrainian, but openly anti-Ukrainian…"

In other words, a specific 'Donbas identity', especially if the status quo is maintained and the 'Transnistrian scenario' continues to develop, could be the result (but not the reason!) of the events of 2014 and the ensuing war.

The question of where this new community's geographical borders will lie is important. Of course, part of the territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions considered 'uncontrolled' came under Kyiv control in summer 2014—the two large towns in the Donetsk region, Kramatorsk and Mariupol.

In both cases, the change of status was not the result of a specific 'identity' or partisan campaign, but the situation on the frontline. In the same way, joining a Ukrainian volunteer battalion or a 'Novorossiya militia' does not necessarily signal an individual's adherence to this or that ideology, but could be an attempt at survival or social advancement in a conflict situation.

In the end, a careful situative analysis of the conflict, with its cultural, economic and media dynamics, is the most promising way to understand this war, which only two years ago appeared impossible.