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The Separatist War in Donbas: A Violent Break-up of Ukraine?[†]

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ABSTRACT

Ukraine previously experienced significant regional political divisions, including separatism in Crimea and Donbas. However, in contrast to post-communist countries such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and former Yugoslavia, prior to 2014 Ukraine was able to avoid a war and a break-up. This study examines the role of separatists, the Yanukovych government, the Maidan opposition and the Maidan government, far-right organizations, Russia, the US, and the EU in the conflict in Donbas. It uses a specially commissioned survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in 2014 to analyse public support for separatism in Donbas, compared to other regions of Ukraine, and the major factors which affect such support. It concludes that all these actors contributed in various ways to the conflict in Donbas, which involved both a civil war and a direct Russian military intervention since August 2014. The study links this conflict to the 'Euromaidan', specifically, the government overthrow by means of the Maidan massacre, and the secession and Russia's annexation of Crimea. The KIIS survey shows that support for separatism is much stronger in Donbas compared to other regions, with the exception of Crimea, and that the break-up of Ukraine is unlikely to extend to its other parts.

The research question

Since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine has experienced significant regional divisions concerning major domestic politics and foreign orientation issues. These include electoral support for major presidential candidates and political parties, the status of the Russian language, Ukraine's membership in the European Union and NATO, and its relations with Russia (Arel, 2006; Barrington & Herron, 2004; Katchanovski, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2014). In terms of political values, the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions, along with Crimea, were the most pro-Russian and pro-Communist regions in Ukraine since its independence in 1991, as measured by vote for political parties and presidential candidates, foreign policy orientations, and support for Russian as the second state language in Ukraine (Katchanovski, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2014). Many previous academic studies have shown the existence of strong regional divisions concerning such political issues and

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[†]An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies conference in Edmonton in October 2014.

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historical conflicts in Ukraine. However, most of the previous studies examined such divisions before the 'Orange Revolution' and the 'Euromaidan', and did not analyse the war in Donbas and separatism in Ukraine.

The violent conflict in Donbas, along with the 'Euromaidan' and the secession and the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014, have brought new attention to the issue of regional divisions and separatism in Ukraine. Following the violent overthrow of the Yanukovych government during 'the Euromaidan' in February 2014, and the secessions and Russia's annexations of the Crimean autonomy and Sevastopol city in March 2014 with help of Russian military intervention, a conflict emerged in Donbas. Pro-Russian separatists – with the direct involvement of groups of armed Russians – seized power in most of Donbas (the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions) and proclaimed the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) in early April 2014. The conflict in Donbas quickly turned into a war.

The Donbas war is not only a major political development that affects the future of Ukraine. It has significance beyond Ukraine. The conflict became a major international conflict and the biggest conflict between the Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War. The war in Donbas involved a direct and indirect Russian military intervention. The total number of refugees chiefly as a result of the conflict in Donbas is estimated on the basis of official statistics of respective countries at about 3 million, including 1.7 million internally displaced people registered in Ukraine and more than one million refugees from Donbas in neighbouring countries, primarily Russia.

The war in Ukraine is very relevant to the EU because Ukraine is one of the largest European countries, borders several EU member states, and is a major transit country for Russian natural gas to many EU members. The direct participation of German chancellor Angela Merkel, French president Francois Hollande, as well as Russian president Vladimir Putin in the negotiations concerning this conflict highlights the international significance of this war. The direct involvement of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in negotiating the Minsk agreements and in monitoring their implementation, also shows the significance of the war to European countries beyond Ukraine.

I will seek to determine why Ukraine has experienced a violent conflict in Donbas. This study analyses the role of different actors and factors in this situation in the emergence of this conflict and its escalation into a war. The analysis relies primarily on Ukrainian, separatist, Russian, and Western governmental, as well as online media, live broadcasts, videos, and other sources concerning the conflict in Ukrainian, Russian, and English. This study also uses a brief survey, commissioned by the author and conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) at the end of April and the beginning of May 2014, which analyses support for separatism in Donbas compared to other regions of Ukraine, and the major factors that affect pro-separatist attitudes.

Disparate narratives regarding the conflict in Donbas

There are many conflicting narratives about the conflict in Donbas. The Ukrainian government, the national media and, to a large extent, their counterparts in the West present the violent conflict in Donbas as led, from its beginning in Spring of 2014, by regular armed Russian military units and Russian military intelligence agents who therefore lack popular backing in this region. They present the war in Donbas as a conventional or a

hybrid war between Ukraine and Russia and attributed its start to a Russian invasion (or Russian 'green men') operating in Donbas without insignia, along with their local assistants. The governments of Ukraine and the US, top NATO officials, and the mainstream Western media typically claim that Russian military and intelligence units were leading the separatist fight in Donbas from the beginning, similar to Russian military units without insignia in Crimea. For example, they present Igor Strelkov (Girkin) as a Russian military intelligence (GRU) officer and his unit, which seized control over Sloviansk town, as a GRU unit. (US Department of State, 2014). Both NATO and Petro Poroshenko, after he became president of Ukraine, stated that there were some 9000 Russian regular troops fighting in Donbas.

However, some of the leading Western media outlets like the BBC and *The New York Times*, have referred later in 2015 to the war in Donbas as a civil war. Such references are nearly absent in the major media in Ukraine, which is mostly controlled by the oligarchs or the government, and in one noted incident, Ruslan Kotsaba, a Western Ukrainian journalist, was arrested and charged with treason for opposing the draft and calling the war in Donbas a civil war. Public opinion concerning the war has thus been affected to a significant extent by the government propaganda and media coverage which generally follows the respective government positions on the conflict lines on the conflict.

For instance, the Ministry of Information Policy was created in Ukraine specifically to disseminate the government propaganda and shape coverage of the war in Donbas in the media and social media. The 2015 Razumkov Centre poll shows that 32% of Ukrainians believe that the war in Donbas is a separatist rebellion supported by Russia, 28% that this is a war between Russia and Ukraine, 16% that this is a civil war, 8% that this is a war between Russia and the US, and 7% that this is a fight for independence of DNR and LNR. This suggests that while a significant minority of Ukrainians share the Ukrainian government and media propagated view that the war in Donbas is a war between Ukraine and Russia, the majority of the respondents view the war in Donbas as an intrastate conflict, mostly with Russian involvement. The difference would be much more significant if the separatist-controlled part of Donbas and annexed Crimea had been included in the poll (Interfax-Ukraine, 2015).

In contrast, polls by the Levada Center show that in Russia minorities of the respondents (less than 30% in 2014–2015) believed that this is a war between Russia and Ukraine, or that regular Russian troops were in Donbas. The majority of Russians back pro-Russian separatism in Donbas, mainly in the form of independence from Ukraine or the incorporation of these regions into Russia. A 2015 TNS/Institute of World Policy poll of 16- to 54-year-olds showed that the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine was perceived as a civil war and a war with Russia, respectively, by 61% and 50% of Germans, 59% and 58% of Italians, 58% and 59% of Dutch, 56% and 59% of Spanish, 55% and 64% of Poles, 47% and 58% of Swedes, 42% and 38% of British, and 42% and 38% of French respondents (Institute of World Policy, 2015).

The Ukrainian and Western governments and the mainstream media generally characterize separatism in Donbas as having a minor support and present the results of a referendum held by separatists after they seized power there as not reflecting public preferences. They maintain that the Ukrainian government came to power as a result of peaceful mass protests after then-President Yanukovych and many members of his government fled Ukraine to avoid responsibility for ordering the massacre of protesters on

20 February 2014. They also emphasize that the Ukrainian government has the legal power to suppress separatism by force.

The post-Yanukovych government of Ukraine characterizes the separatists as 'terrorists' and its military operation in Donbas as 'the anti-terrorist operation' (ATO). Two-thirds (64%) of the respondents in a 2015 Razumkov Center poll agreed with the classification of the DNR and the LNR as terrorist organizations (Interfax-Ukraine, 2015). The central government denies responsibility for civilian casualties during a war there, claiming that the separatists themselves are killing residents of the cities and villages in which they were based. The US and other Western governments generally ignore civilian casualty figures, claim a lack of evidence to determine responsibility for deadly attacks on civilians (while attributing them largely to Russian military actions), and argue that the Ukrainian forces are showing restraint in their use of force.

For its part, the Russian government and the media present the war in Donbas as a civil war that followed an attempt by the Ukrainian government forces and far-right paramilitary formations to suppress, by military force, a popular uprising of the Donbas residents against the Maidan-led government which was installed and controlled by the US. Russian and separatist politicians and the pro-separatist and Russian media claim that a 'fascist junta' seized power in Ukraine as a result of a US-led coup d'état and that separatists, including Russian volunteers, defended the people of Donbas from Ukrainian 'fascists'. They argue that separatism has widespread popular support in all Eastern and Southern Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to this part of Ukraine as 'Novorossiya' (New Russia), the region's historical name when it belonged to the Russian Empire. Some separatist leaders and commanders stated that they intended to expand their control to other regions of 'Novorossiya' and even to overthrow the central government of Ukraine. The Russian government has consistently denied that its regular military forces were involved in the Donbas conflict. The Russian government and media and separatist leaders have attributed civilian casualties in Donbas, including a shot-down of a Malaysian passenger plane, to the Ukrainian forces. A Russian government investigative agency has launched an investigation into the 'genocide of the Russian-speaking population' in Donbas.

Academic studies show similar differences in defining the nature of the Donbas conflict and its main factors. Some Western scholars characterize the war in Donbas as a Russian invasion, first by special units of 'green men' and then by regular Russian troops (Czuperski, Herbst, Higgins, Polyakova, & Wilson, 2015; Wilson, 2014). In contrast, some scholars emphasize the expansion of NATO towards Russian borders, and Western support for the regime change in Ukraine, as triggering the Russian annexation of Crimea and its support for separatists in Donbas (Mearsheimer, 2014; Sakwa, 2015).

Other studies characterize the conflict as a civil war along with Russian military intervention which they define in various ways. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2015), for example, classifies the conflict in Donbas as intrastate. These studies conclude that the conflict in Donbas started primarily because of domestic factors, such as ethnicity, language, economic links to Russia, and the vacuum of power in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions following the overthrow of the Yanukovych government and seizures of local administrations by separatists and Russian paramilitary units who copied similar seizures by the Maidan opposition activists in Western and Central Ukraine during the 'Euromaidan'. Differences persist, however, on which of these factors were of primary

importance in the start of the war and support for separatism (see Giuliano, 2015; Katchanovski, 2014; Kudelia, 2014; Robinson, in press; Zhukov, 2016).

Separatism in various forms in independent Ukraine has persistently manifested itself in Crimea, in Donbas, and to a lesser extent in some neighbouring regions. (Katchanovski, 2006a, 2008, 2015a). Pro-Russian separatist leaders and parties were in power in Crimea in the first half of the 1990s. There was a real possibility of secession in Crimea at that time. Separatism also emerged in Donbas during the same time period, but it always had weaker support there than in Crimea. In the end of 2004, the Party of Regions attempted to proclaim an autonomous republic in the East and the South during the Orange Revolution when Yanukovych's fraudulent victory in the presidential elections was overturned as a result of mass protests. At the time Ukraine also came close to a violent conflict and a possible break-up (Katchanovski, 2006a).

In spite of such manifestations of separatism and persistent regional divisions, however, very few scholars considered a break-up and a violent regional conflict in Ukraine as significant possibilities (Colton, 2010; Darden, 2010; Katchanovski, 2006a, 2008). Most either ignored such issues as insignificant, or argued that even though Ukraine was divided along regional lines, it was unlikely to experience a violent regional conflict leading to secession. For instance, the attempt to proclaim an autonomous republic in the East and the South during the 'Orange Revolution' was seen as thoroughly contrived. With a few exceptions, separatism in Donbas received no scholarly treatment before the start of the conflict in this region. (Katchanovski, 2006a, pp. 99–100). Until the beginning of 2014 and in contrast to other post-communist countries, such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and the former Yugoslavia, Ukraine was able to avoid a violent conflict and break-up.

Major actors in the conflict in Donbas

The conflict in Donbas emerged following the 'Euromaidan', which both preceded and affected this conflict by producing a spiral of escalating violence and overthrowing Viktor Yanukovych and his Party of Regions-led government. Mass anti-government protests started in Ukraine at the end of November 2013 after the Yanukovych government abruptly changed its decision to sign an association and free trade agreement with the European Union. The conflict escalated and turned violent around 4:00 am on 30 November after special police units (Berkut) violently dispersed a relatively small group of protesters on the Maidan. Some evidence indicates that this police violence was exploited because Maidan leaders and the Inter TV channel, which broadcast it live, knew in advance about the planned police assault (Katchanovski, 2015b, p. 61).

The mass protests against the police violence followed on 1 December in Kyiv City. In addition to peaceful rallies, they included seizures of the Kyiv City Hall and the Trade Union Building by a radical wing of the opposition and a violent attack led by radical nationalist and neo-Nazi organizations and football ultras, which formed the Right Sector, on the presidential administration. Yanukovych attempted again to disperse protesters on the Maidan by force and adopted laws restricting the freedoms of assembly and protest. At the end of January, the far-right elements of the opposition, led by the Right Sector and football ultras, led an attack on the parliament. The attack escalated the conflict, and it resulted in a violent confrontation and a stand-off with the special police and interior troops units. Various evidence suggests that the killings of the first three protesters

in January, as well as some other highly publicized but unresolved cases of violence which the opposition attributed to the Yanukovych forces, were in fact false flag operations designed to further escalate the conflict. The investigation under both the Yanukovych and Maidan governments determined that they were killed from close distance in the Maidan-controlled area (see Katchanovski, 2015b, p. 62). The Prosecutor General Office of Ukraine since the end of 2014 has been investigating leaders and members of UNA-UNSO, one of the founding organizations of the Right Sector, as suspects in the killings of these three Armenian, Belarusian, and Western Ukrainian protesters and another protester who was killed on 18 February (Pechersk District Court, 2015a).

Maidan opposition leaders initially condemned the 1 December and the January attacks as 'provocations', while Yanukovych resorted to negotiations with the leaders of the pro-Western opposition under pressure from the protesters and the Western governments, primarily the US government, which generally sided with the opposition. However, on 18 February 2014, the Maidan Self-Defence and the Right Sector attempted to storm the parliament during a 'Euromaidan' opposition march. They attacked the police units guarding the parliament with 'Molotov cocktails' and stones, burned the Party of Regions headquarters, and killed one of its employees. Special police units and 'titushki' dispersed and beat both the violent attackers and peaceful protesters. At least several protesters were killed as a result of this dispersal and a stampede. In a major escalation of the conflict, concealed shooters started to use live ammunition against both protesters and the police during these clashes. They killed about two dozen protesters on 18 and 19 February and nine Berkut policemen and Interior Troops servicemen. The opposition-led protesters also seized regional administrations, police, and security services headquarters in Western Ukraine and some other regions, primarily in the Center. In contrast, the opposition protests in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, especially in Crimea and Donbas, during the 'Euromaidan' were limited, and they were often confronted there by the pro-government 'titushki'.

The Yanukovych government attempted to seize the Maidan and its headquarters in the Trade Union buildings following the 18 February attacks on the parliament and the Party of Regions headquarters. But after these attempts to seize the Maidan and the Maidan Self-Defence and Right Sector headquarters at the occupied Trade Union building in Kyiv City were stopped by use of live ammunition from elements of the Maidan opposition, including the Right Sector, and by their burning down of that building, Yanukovych agreed to negotiations with opposition leaders on 19 February 2014 (Katchanovski, 2015b). A truce deal was negotiated between Yanukovych and the opposition leaders. However, shortly after midnight on 20 February, the leader of the Right Sector stated that his organization did not accept this truce, and threatened to use force to oust the government.

A study of the publicly available evidence suggests that the government of Viktor Yanukovych was overthrown as a result of mass killings of the police and protesters on 18–20 February and that elements of the 'Euromaidan' oppositional far-right and oligarchic parties, specifically the Right Sector, Svoboda and Fatherland, were involved in this violence in order to gain power after the mostly peaceful mass protests had failed to achieve such an outcome. Such evidence includes publicly available videos and photos of suspected shooters, live statements by the Maidan announcers, radio intercepts of the actual 'shooters', and snipers and commanders from the special Alfa unit of the

Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), ballistic and medical examinations, eyewitness reports by both Maidan protesters and government special units commanders, public statements by the government officials, similar ammunition and weapons used against the police and the protesters, and similar types of wounds among both protesters and the police. (Katchanovski, 2015b, in press).

If Yanukovych had implemented initial plans to use force, including live ammunition and military units to suppress the 'Euromaidan', this would likely have resulted in a large number of casualties among the protesters, and a full-fledged uprising in the opposition stronghold in Western Ukraine, and likely civil war. But in order to preserve his power after the 'snipers' massacre' had severely undermined his legitimacy among his supporters – even in his party's strongholds in Eastern and Southern Ukraine – he agreed to a compromise deal with the opposition, negotiated with the participation of the foreign ministers of France, Germany, Poland, and a Russian government representative on 21 February 2014. Yanukovych, however, fled from Kyiv and then from Ukraine after radical elements of the 'Euromaidan' opposition reneged on the compromise agreement and threatened to resume violence if he did not resign.

The US government and major EU countries de facto backed this violent overthrow of the relatively pro-Russian government by reneging on 21 February deal and immediately recognizing the new government of Ukraine. The issue of the potential involvement of the US government or governments of the EU states in the Yanukovych government overthrow requires further research. There are certain indications that the US government engaged in a 'regime change' during the 'Euromaidan', but to date many government sources concerning these events are not available to researchers.

The violent overthrow of the relatively pro-Russian government, specifically by means of mass killings of the police and protesters, was a tipping point in the conflict between the West and Russia over Ukraine. President Putin used this overthrow and its backing by the governments of the US and EU countries to radically change his policy towards Ukraine. The Russian government started to pursue secession of Crimea with the help of direct military intervention since the end of February 2014 and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 in a violation of international law. Such direct Russian backing of separatism in Crimea and the annexation of this region by Russia also encouraged separatists in other regions with significant ethnic Russian populations, such as Donbas, Kharkiv, and Odesa.

The mass killing of the protesters and the police that resulted in the overthrow of the Yanukovych government was also a critical juncture in the separatist rebellion in Donbas in Eastern Ukraine. The overthrow of the government led to a power vacuum in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions, which were – until then – strongholds of Yanukovych and his Party of Regions. Starting in March 2014, unarmed and armed separatists seized and occupied regional administrations, security service (SBU), and police headquarters in Donetsk, Luhansk, and other cities and towns in the regions. Igor Strelkov and other members of his armed group of Russian nationalists arrived from Russia via Crimea and seized police headquarters in the towns of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk in the Donetsk Region on 12 April 2014. The local police and security services either refused to offer armed resistance to the separatists and the Strelkov Russian unit, or sided with them to various degrees.

A careful review suggests that much of the evidence regarding direct Russian military intervention during this initial period was misrepresented or even fabricated. This

concerns Ukrainian and Western governments' claims that Russian military and intelligence units or 'green men' were leading the separatist fight in Donbas since it started in Spring 2014. For example, Strelkov and members of his armed group in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk were identified by the Ukrainian and US governments as a Russian military intelligence (GRU) unit. However, the publicly available evidence indicates that Strelkov was a retired officer of the Federal Security Service. A 'bearded man' from the Strelkov group had been falsely identified as a commander of a Chechen GRU battalion solely on the basis of superficial similarities of their facial features, while he was a Russian Cossack (see Shuster, 2014).

However, the issue of a covert involvement of the Russian government in the start of the separatist rebellion in Donbas requires further research because many of the Russian government sources concerning these events are still not available to researchers. In both Donbas and the 'Euromaidan', however, foreign governments alone could not have been able to covertly seize power in Donbas and Ukraine, respectively, and to produce large numbers of activists and supporters.

The Russian government initially denied direct military involvement in Crimea in March 2014, despite evidence that Russian military units without insignia ('green men') were operating there along with separatist self-defence units, which included many Berkut members, and were seizing Ukrainian military units and government headquarters there (Katchanovski, 2015a). Evidence indicates that, in contrast to its direct military intervention in Crimea, Russia initially supported separatists in Donbas by allowing volunteers and weapons to cross the border from Russia, and in providing weapons, recruitment, training, and safe haven to separatists. The Russian government also threatened to use military force in Ukraine, and deployed large numbers of its military personnel near the border with the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions and other regions of Ukraine in Spring and Summer 2014.

The Strelkov-led Russian nationalist unit and the local separatists also tried to seize control over local airport and telecommunication infrastructure and nearby towns. These attacks lead to counterattacks by the government forces, which refused to consider a peaceful resolution of the conflict and launched the 'ATO' in the East on 13 April 2014. The new Maidan-led government attempted to neutralize the separatists through the use of military force and special police and security units. An SBU officer was killed on the same day during an attempt by an SBU special Alfa unit to seize the separatist leaders in Sloviansk, which was then controlled by the Strelkov-led armed group of Russians and local separatists.

However, many of the government forces were initially reluctant to follow the orders to use force against the separatists. As a result, paramilitary units and special police battalions, organized by the radical nationalist and neo-Nazi organizations with help of the government and oligarchs, were much more ideologically motivated and willing to use force. Various evidence indicates that the Right Sector was involved in a deadly attack of a separatist checkpoint in Sloviansk on 20 April 2014. The evidence includes his business card found there, a later admission by Dmytro Yarosh, the Right Sector leader, that this was his first battle, and a court ruling revealing that the same exact weapon was used by the attackers and killers of the Internal Troops servicemen on the Maidan (BBC Ukrainian, 2015; Pechersk District Court, 2015b). This attack by the paramilitary alliance of radical nationalist and neo-Nazi organizations constituted a major escalation of the conflict

in Donbas because it broke the Geneva agreement, which was signed on 17 April 2014 by Ukraine, Russia, the EU, and the US concerning a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and the Orthodox Easter ceasefire between the Ukrainian government and separatists.

Similarly, the special police battalion Azov, organized by the neo-Nazi Social-National Assembly with help of the Radical Party, was involved in an attack of a district police head-quarters in Mariupol on 9 May 2014, which resulted in casualties among the police and civilians. The special police battalion Dnipro, organized with the participation of the Right Sector and the oligarch-governor of the Dnipropetrovsk Region, Ihor Kolomoisky, was involved in this attack and in another deadly assault in Krasnoarmiisk in the Donetsk Region in early May 2014. An analysis of live broadcasts, videos, and media reports indicates that the Right Sector, which was dominated in Odessa and Kharkiv by the Social-National Assembly, football ultras from these cities, and Maidan Self-Defence units, massacred 42 pro-Russian separatists and employees there on 2 May 2014 by setting fire to the Trade Union building in Odessa in the south of Ukraine after deadly clashes with local separatists (Katchanovski, 2015c).

Special police battalions, the Azov battalion/regiment, and paramilitary formations, such as the Volunteer Ukrainian Corps, organized and led since Spring and Summer 2014 by far-right organizations, such as the Right Sector, the Social-National Assembly, and Svoboda, have constituted a minority of the Ukrainian forces during the war in Donbas, but these far-right formations were disproportionally involved in the violent conflict, specifically violence against civilians and prisoners of war. Small numbers of volunteers and mercenaries, citizens of Belarus, Canada, France, Italy, Russia, Sweden, and the US, including neo-Nazis, served in Ukrainian far right-led units. They mainly joined the Azov battalion, which was later transformed into a regiment (see Katchanovski, 2015c).

The violence by separatists and the central government also had major roles in escalation of the conflict into a full scale war. A separatist attack on 22 May 2014 resulted in the death of 16 Ukrainian army soldiers near Volnovakha. On 1 July 2014 after a brief truce, the Poroshenko government launched a large-scale military operation against separatists.

A daily examination of various live broadcasts, videos, and media reports shows that the separatist leaders, commanders, and members of their armed units, were mostly residents of Donbas and, to a lesser extent, other regions of Ukraine. They included ethnic Russian nationalists, anti-Maidan activists, splinter Communist Party, and Party of Regions activists, and former members of Berkut and SBU. But a significant number of volunteers and mercenaries also came to Donbas directly from or via Russia or Crimea. The analysis of the same numerous sources indicates that these included mostly Russian nationalists, Russian Cossacks, Chechens, Ingushes, and Ossetians and relatively small numbers of Communists and neo-Nazis and citizens of other post-Soviet states, Serbia, and Western countries.

Various sources show that, in spite of continuing denial by the Russian government, direct Russian military intervention in Donbas began at the end of August 2014. It took the form of incursions by several battalion-size units in order to prevent a defeat of separatist forces and attacks of Donetsk and Luhansk cities. These include a report by the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine in 2015, as well as reports by separatists, videos of Russian military convoys, videos of captured Russian soldiers and equipment, first-hand reports by Western media and eyewitnesses, and released satellite images of Russian military vehicles on the Ukrainian side of the border. They all suggest that the Russian forces, along with the separatist units, took part in combat with the Ukrainian forces and far right-led battalions

in the Illovaisk area, encircled many of the Ukrainian units, and killed around 400 of them during their attempt to leave the encirclement. Similar evidence shows that some regular Russian units also took part in the Debaltseve battle in February 2015. The Russian forces were usually involved in the combat from a distance, such as shelling the Ukrainian positions from artillery, multiple rockets, and tanks. There are videos and other evidence that they started shelling of the Ukrainian positions from the Russian territory near the border in July 2014. There were also reports from different sources about incursions of regular Russian units in Donbas in Fall 2014 and August 2015. In addition, such evidence indicates that since the end of summer 2014 regular Russian troops in Donbas included, at a minimum, military advisers, operators of advance weapon systems, and military reconnaissance and intelligence units (see Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2015; Sky News, 2015).

Indirect evidence of Russian military intervention includes a relatively rapid change in the military situation in Donbas in August 2014 and February 2015. Before the end of August 2014, separatists were under attack by Ukrainian forces and had been retreating from Sloviansk and Kramatorsk to the more densely populated parts of Donbas, particularly the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. However, following direct Russian military interventions in Donbas during battles at the end of August 2014 and in February 2015, the Ukrainian regular units and special police and far right-led volunteer battalions suffered encirclements, retreats, and losses in the Illovaisk and Debaltseve areas, respectively. In both of these cases, President Poroshenko rapidly reversed his reliance on military force against separatists and he negotiated the Minsk ceasefire agreements. In addition, changes in the top leadership of DNR and LNR in mid-August 2014 preceded the Russian military intervention in Donbas. These include the replacements of Alexander Borodai, the prime minister of DNR, and Strelkov, the defence minister of DNR, with local separatist leaders. In contrast, a similar direct military intervention by regular Russian forces before August 2014 and permanent presence and continuing direct involvement in combat of significant regular Russian military forces have not been corroborated directly and indirectly by the analysis of the various sources.

Analysis of various sources, in particular Ukrainian media reports, suggest that Ukraine became a US 'client state' after the 'Euromaidan' and during the conflict in Donbas. The US government had obtained influence over appointments of top officials, for instance, prime minister Arseniy Yatseniuk, and over policies of the Ukrainian government, in particular, concerning the conflicts in Crimea and Donbas (see, for instance, Mostovaia, 2015). There was nearly perfect alignments of Ukrainian and US government positions concerning major foreign policy issues, including the war in Donbas. Specifically, top US government officials generally expressed unconditional backing of the Ukrainian government policies concerning the conflict in Donbas, and the US provided free of charge military training and military equipment to the Ukrainian forces. But the US government and other Western countries have excluded the possibility of direct military intervention in the war in Donbas.

Similarly, there is evidence, including separatist sources, that suggests that the separatist republics in Donbas became de facto client states of Russia at the end of summer 2014. Soon after the direct Russian military intervention in August 2014, almost all separatist units in Donbas were brought under the de facto overall command of Russian military 'curators' or advisers. Most of the original separatist commanders in charge of such units, including Strelkov, were forced to leave Donbas for Russia. The remaining commanders were partly

incorporated into the new military-style units, which were equipped and trained by the Russian military. Some of the original separatist commanders were arrested or killed, like Oleksii Mozhovoi, for resisting such incorporation (see e.g. Colonel, 2015).

The violent conflict in Donbas can thus be defined as a civil war with both direct and indirect military intervention of a foreign state. The predominant involvement of local separatists at the start of the conflict, along with the prevalence of local residents along with residents of other Ukrainian regions among the leadership and in the armed formations points to this origins of this conflict as a civil war. Currently available evidence indicates that the Russian government's indirect support for separatists, and subsequent direct military intervention, came after the start of the conflict in Donbas. However, this intervention also proved decisive in enabling the separatists to turn the tide of the war and prevent the Ukrainian forces from recapturing all of Donbas.

The separatist conflict in Donbas is thus in many ways similar to violent conflicts and secessions in other post-Soviet states, such as Transdniestria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. Like in Donbas, separatist movements in these countries emerged in regions populated by ethnic minorities. The central governments of these countries also refused to offer autonomy to these regions and relied on military or police forces and paramilitary units to suppress separatism. These attempts failed largely because of military interventions by Russia in the form of the Russian 14th army in Transdniestria, and Russian military intervention in Abkhazia and South Ossetia following an attack by Georgia in 2008. Similarly, Armenia intervened militarily and directly in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

As of the end of January 2016, the minimum estimate of direct casualties of the war in Donbas is around 13,000 people killed. This estimate is based on the UN report of at least 9098 confirmed casualties in Donbas as of 15 November 2015 (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015a), adjusted by an estimate of presumed casualties among the reported 1200–2000 missing, presumed undercounting of casualties among separatists, Russian volunteers and mercenaries, and Russian regular troops, and media reports concerning casualties since 15 November. The minimal estimated number of killed members of the Ukrainian military, National Guard, police, Security Service, border guards, and paramilitary units is around 4000. This estimate is based on official reports of their casualties, updated with media reports and adjusted for missing in action who are presumed to be killed. It includes about 3000 confirmed casualties among the Ukrainian armed forces, including more than 1000 non-combat related (Dzerkalo tyzhnia, 2015). The majority of the officially reported 283–800 missing soldiers are also presumed killed.

There have been at least 400 casualties among the National Guard, the police, SBU, and border guards. In addition, there have been estimated a few hundred casualties among members of the far-right formations. The casualties among armed separatists units, including Russian volunteers, are estimated to be at least 2500, since they had an advantage of mainly defensive operations during most of the war and no large-scale casualties from encirclements and shot-down military planes and helicopters. A rough estimate of killed Russian regular troops, primarily involved in fighting in August 2014 and February 2015, is close to 100. This estimate is derived from reported and corroborated cases of individual casualties, and it is consistent with a compilation of about 80 cases of the Russian military personnel killed in undisclosed circumstances and locations in 2014 and 2015 (BBC

Russian, 2016). The number of civilian casualties is at least 6000, including 298 passengers and crew of the Malaysian airliner. In addition, thousands or tens of thousands of people in this region, and in the government controlled part of Ukraine, are likely to be indirect casualties of the war as a result of higher mortality rates e.g. due to inadequate medical care, heating, and food linked to the war, but their numbers are difficult to estimate more precisely because of lack of data.

The analysis of various sources, such as the UN and OSCE mission reports, videos of the attacks, and Western journalists on-site reports, suggests that the majority of civilian casualties during the Ukrainian attack stage and positional stages of the war resulted from shelling by the Ukrainian forces of cities, towns, and villages used by armed separatists as their bases (See, for example, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015a, 2015b). Attacks on Luhansk, Stanytsia Luhanska, Horlivka, and Donetsk involved multiple civilian casualties stemming from both collateral casualties from shelling by the Ukrainian regular forces and volunteer far-right battalions of both rebels and civilians. However, the separatists or Russian forces were responsible for the most of major deadly attacks during their advance in January and February 2015, such as shelling of Volnovakha and Mariupol that resulted in multiple civilian casualties. There is also evidence to suggest that a separatist or Russian crew shot down Malaysian passenger plane MH17 in July 2014, likely by mistaking it for a Ukrainian military transport plane. This analysis and common political science definitions show that genocide, fascist junta, and terrorism are not appropriate terms to define the conflict in Donbas.

Determinants of support for separatism

A national survey, excepting Crimea, conducted for the author by the KIIS in April/May 2014, indicates much higher levels of popular support for separatism in Donbas, compared to other regions of Ukraine. It shows that the majority of Donbas residents backed various forms of separatism (54% overall or 61%, excluding undecideds) in April/May 2014. Support for separatism in Donbas far exceeded separatist support in the three Eastern

Table 1. Support for separatism in different regions of Ukraine, the 2014 KIIS Survey, per cent.

	Donbas	Other East	South[a]	Center	Bukovyna	Galicia	Transcarpathia	Volhynia
Secession from Ukraine and joining another state	23	3	2	1	0	0	0	0
Secession from Ukraine and formation of independent state	8	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
Autonomy as a part of federal Ukraine	23	10	7	2	0	0	0	0
Preserving current status within unitary Ukraine with expanded powers	26	55	59	54	69	68	84	59
Preserving current status within unitary Ukraine with current powers	9	18	23	31	13	22	11	40
Don't know/not sure	11	12	8	12	18	10	5	1
Total, %	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	311	377	214	704	39	224	55	94

[a]Crimea is not included.

regions neighbouring Donbas and in the South (Table 1). But it was significantly lower than indicated by other surveys in Crimea (Katchanovski, 2015a; O'Loughlin & Toal, 2015).

The KIIS survey asked about attitudes towards different forms of separatism, which includes not only outright secessionism but also unilateral demands of greater autonomy or federalism (Cabestan & Pavković, 2013; Katchanovski, 2006a). Statements by top leaders, including President Poroshenko, and actions by the Security Service of Ukraine show that the Ukrainian government after the 'Euromaidan' has de facto made illegal public support not only for secession but also for a regional autonomy and federalism (UNIAN, 2016). Prior to April 2014 many separatist leaders, specifically in Donbas, called for federalism and regional autonomy in Ukraine. The Russian government also pressed for federalism and de facto confederation which would have given Donbas the power to block decisions of the central government, including those regarding matters of foreign policy.

In the 2014 KIIS survey, 23% of the respondents in Donbas favoured autonomy as a part of federal Ukraine, compared to 8% supporting independence of their region, while 23% favoured the region joining Russia. Conversely, preserving the pre-war status of their regions within a unitary Ukraine, but with expanded powers, had support of 9%. These survey results also show that views expressed by the Russian government and the media concerning widespread popular support for separatism in all of Eastern and Southern Ukraine were unfounded (see Table 1).

A 2015 KIIS survey produced similar results in separatist-controlled Donbas. The option of joining Russia was favoured by 16% of the respondents, independence from Ukraine by 26%, autonomy within a federal Ukraine by 18%, extended powers in a unitary Ukraine by 20%, and a return to the pre-war status of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions was supported by 12% (Telekrytyka, 2015).

The 2014 KIIS Survey also shows that ethnic Russians in Ukraine, with the exception of Crimea, were split on the issue of separatism. Similar percentages of ethnic Russians supported preservation of the existing unitary system (43%), mostly with expanded powers, and different separatist options (42%), including 16% who preferred their region to join Russia. Interestingly, people of mixed Russian and Ukrainian descent showed stronger support for separatism, not only compared to ethnic Ukrainians but also to ethnic Russians (Table 2). By contrast, only 24% of Russian speakers, including many ethnic Ukrainians, favoured secession from Ukraine or regional autonomy in a federal Ukraine (see Table 3).

No major national political party in Ukraine openly supports the separatists in Donbas. The Ukrainian government not only prohibits separatist parties and organizations in

Table 2. Support for separatism by major ethnic groups in Ukraine, the 2014 KIIS Survey, per cent.

	Ukrainians	Russians	Both Russian and Ukrainian	Other
Secession from Ukraine and joining another state	2	16	25	14
Secession from Ukraine and formation of independent state	1	6	9	3
Autonomy as a part of federal Ukraine	5	20	18	14
Preserving current status within unitary Ukraine with expanded powers	57	35	23	29
Preserving current status within unitary Ukraine with current powers	25	8	9	23
Don't know/not sure	10	16	18	17
Total, %	100	100	100	100
N	1693	229	57	35

Note: Crimea is not included.

Table 3. Support for separatism by major languages in Ukraine, the 2014 KIIS Survey, per cent.

	Ukrainian	Russian	Mixture of Russian and Ukrainian
Secession from Ukraine and joining another state	1	9	3
Secession from Ukraine and formation of independent state	1	3	2
Autonomy as a part of federal Ukraine	1	12	5
Preserving current status within unitary Ukraine with expanded powers	61	45	57
Preserving current status within unitary Ukraine with current powers	28	18	24
Don't know/not sure	8	13	10
Total, %	100	100	100
N	802	934	284

Note: Crimea is not included.

Ukraine, it also has disbanded the Communist Party on separatism charges, and launched criminal cases against some leaders of the Party of Regions on similar charges. Indeed, significant numbers of supporters of the Party of Regions and the Communist Party back the separatists contrary to official positions of these parties. The 2014 KIIS Survey shows that 20% of those who intend to vote for the Party of Regions, and 15% of those who intend to vote for the Communist Party, favoured regional secession from Ukraine and joining another state, which means in almost all cases Russia, or forming an

Table 4. Determinants of support for separatism in Ukraine, 2014 KIIS survey, OLS regression.

	Unstandardized regression coefficient (B)	Standardized regression coefficient (β)
Volhynia	−.052	−.020
Transcarpathia	−.035	−.010
Bukovyna	−.025	−.006
Center	.035	.029
Donbas	.711***	.452
Other East	.120*	.082
South[a]	.071	.039
Ethnic Russian	.331***	.199
Other ethnic minority	.234**	.052
Russian speaker	−.037	−.032
Male	.064**	.057
Age	−.003***	−.079
Education	−.009	−.030
Settlement type	.009	.039
Fatherland	−.060	−.032
Svoboda	−.033	−.011
Communist Party	.159**	.059
Party of Regions	.091	.038
Solidarity	−.129***	−.088
Our Ukraine	−.180	−.033
Other parties	−.138*	−.046
Against all parties	−.030	−.016
Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate)	.114**	.078
Orthodox Autocephalous	−.015	−.003
Orthodox (Kyiv Patriarchate)	.016	.013
Greek Catholic	.034	.015
Other religions	−.113	−.026
No religious confession	.055	.043
Constant	1.141***	
Adjusted R-square	.373	
N	1801	

[a]Does not include Crimea.
*Statistically significant at the .05 level.
**Statistically significant at the .01 level.
***Statistically significant at the .001 level.

independent state. Autonomy for their regions as a part of federal Ukraine was preferred by 18% of likely Party of Regions voters, and 19% of likely Communist voters. But 22% of the respondents, who did not intend to vote, also expressed secessionist views, while 12% supported regional autonomy as a part of a federal state in Ukraine.

Multiple regression analysis of the 2014 KIIS Survey data shows that, when other factors are held constant, the residents of Donbas expressed much stronger support for separatism than other regions. Pro-separatist views there were also stronger than in the neighbouring regions of Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, and Zaporizhzhia. Ethnic Russians, other ethnic minorities, Communist Party likely voters, younger people, adherents to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (the Moscow Patriarchate), and men all expressed stronger, statistically significant support for separatism. Standardized regression coefficients show that the residence in Donbas was the biggest determinant of pro-separatist views, while self-identification as an ethnic Russian has the second strongest effect (see Table 4).

Residence in other major historic and geographic regions, other political party affiliation, other religious confession, being a Russian speaker, education level, and settlement type did not have any significant positive impact on support for separatism.[1]

Conclusion

Separatists, the Yanukovych government, the Maidan opposition, the Maidan government, far-right organizations, Russia, the US, and the EU contributed to the start and escalation of violent separatist conflict in Donbas, and the de-facto break-up of Ukraine, in different ways. They all misrepresented the conflict in Donbas to various extent, but their actions did not all have an equal impact. The presumed covert involvement of the US and Russia, the former in the violent regime change during the 'Euromaidan', the latter in the start of the conflict in Donbas requires further research because of lack of publicly available data concerning these events. Regional political culture in Donbas and Russian ethnicity were strongest determinants of support for separatism in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea.

This study suggests that it is almost impossible in the foreseeable future to permanently resolve the conflict in Donbas and thereby to unite Ukraine once again even without Crimea. It is far more likely that this war can either turn into a frozen conflict, similar to Transdniestria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, or the violence can once again escalate. The civil war in Donbas, with Russian military intervention, has already led to the de facto independence of the DNR and the LNR, which control the most populated parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions. Alongside the annexation of Crimea, we are witnessing the de-facto break-up of Ukraine. But while the KIIS survey shows that separatism has significantly higher support in Donbas compared to other regions of Ukraine, it also suggests that other regions are not likely to follow Donbas and separate from Ukraine.

Note

1. Voting preference for Solidarity actually had a negative effect on pro-separatist attitudes (see Table 4). The attitudes towards separatism are measured on a scale from 1 to 3, with 1 indicating support for preservation of the respondents' region in unitary Ukraine with current

or expanded powers of regions, 2 defining support for federal Ukraine with significant regional autonomy, and 3 expressing support for secession of their region from Ukraine and joining another state or becoming independent.

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