



Jakob Hauter (ed.)

CIVIL WAR? INTERSTATE WAR? HYBRID WAR?

*Dimensions and Interpretations
of the Donbas Conflict in 2014–2020*

With a foreword by Andrew Wilson

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Foreword

Andrew Wilson

The war in the Donbas has lasted longer than both the First and Second World Wars. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported between 13,000 and 13,200 deaths by the end of February 2020, including 3,350 civilians (OHCHR 2020). Attempts to redress the economic damage, such as the World Bank's (2020) \$100 million "Eastern Ukraine: Reconnect, Recover, Revitalize Project," have barely scratched the surface. The war has frustrated two Ukrainian presidents: Neither Petro Poroshenko's military-first approach nor Volodymyr Zelenskyi's flexible diplomacy has brought much more than periodic cease-fires and prisoner exchanges. The war even provided the background to President Donald Trump's impeachment, as he was accused of withholding U.S. military aid to Ukraine.

The debate over the causes of the war is the key to any possible diplomatic or military solution to it. The center of academic discourse has shifted somewhat since 2014, with the publication of detailed studies into the operations of Russian "curators" on the ground and their active involvement in fomenting unrest in southern and eastern Ukraine (Hosaka 2018; 2019; Shandra and Seely 2019). However, as Jakob Hauter writes in his conclusion to this volume, the academic debate is far from over and additional research is required to determine whether the Kremlin, indeed, "controlled rather than merely supported the key actors behind" the unrest. Much of the literature on Russian curators focuses on events in Crimea, Odesa, and elsewhere and on the period before and after the spring of 2014 rather than directly on the Donbas in the build-up to the war. Studies that use open source intelligence for forensic assessments of the downing of MH17 and other operations in the Donbas itself mainly come from journalistic sources (see, for example, Bellingcat n.d.).

Not all debate is research-based. In Ukraine as a whole, a growing number of domestic, Russian, and Russian-backed voices

have been reviving a debate about the events of 2014. Viktor Medvedchuk's expanded media empire, Party of Regions veterans like Andrii Portnov and former Justice Minister Olena Lukash, various Telegram channels, as well as websites like *strana.ua* and *ukraina.ru* have been reviving "Anti-Maidan" narratives—Maidan protestors were paid, the West was behind them, not so many were killed—and echoing Russian narratives about the Donbas conflict as a "civil war." They have also added a further narrative about domestic oligarchs maintaining the war and profiteering from it (Bratushchak 2020; Poptsova 2020). These framings have been undermining the founding narratives of post-Maidan Ukraine—the idea of a new civic nation and the "European choice" that was written into the constitution in February 2019 (Haran, Yakovlyev, and Zolkina 2019).

The need for informed analysis is therefore just as strong as in 2014. This volume is an invaluable guide to the debate about internal versus external factors as causes of the war and on how that debate has developed since 2014. It also provides some indicative ways on how to overcome that divide. As Hauter says, "the question is not whether the war is purely internal or interstate, but which of the two components outweighs the other." An impressive range of scholars have been collected to show some of the best existing research and analysis and offer a thought-provoking guide to further investigation. This book is a must-read for any scholar of Ukraine, Russia, or conflict studies.

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Introduction

The Challenge of Labelling the Donbas War

Jakob Hauter

In 2021, the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine's Donbas¹ will enter its eighth year. Fighting has decreased in intensity, in particular compared to its peak in 2014–2015. Nevertheless, armed clashes continue to occur at the time of writing and a lasting solution to the conflict is not in sight. Over the years, the positions of both sides have become deeply entrenched. This entrenchment is not limited to military fortifications along the contact line. It also concerns the way in which the war is characterized in the political discourse. According to Ukrainian law, the armed conflict is a war between Ukraine and Russia. Parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions are “temporarily occupied” and controlled by a “Russian occupation administration” as the result of Russian “military aggression” against Ukraine (Supreme Council of Ukraine 2018). According to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the conflict is a “civil war” between “Kyiv, Donetsk, and Luhansk,” in which Russia acts as a “mediator” but has no direct involvement (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d.).

Insurrection or Invasion?

A similar divide between two camps supporting diametrically opposed characterizations of the war has not only appeared among political organizations and mass media around the world but also in the academic debate. Naturally, the positions on either side of this academic divide are more nuanced than the positions of Kyiv and Moscow. Rather than denying the existence of either domestic Ukrainian dynamics or Russian intervention, scholars argue about the relative importance of these two dimensions.

¹ Donbas is short for Donets Basin. It consists of Donetsk Region and Luhansk Region.

Disagreements between academics about this issue have become particularly apparent in two debates on the George Washington University's PONARS Eurasia research portal. The first one took place in fall 2014 when Serhiy Kudelia (2014a) published a policy memo which argued that "the Donbas insurrection" was "primarily a homegrown phenomenon." This memo was followed by responses from Andreas Umland (2014; 2018) and Yuriy Matsiyevsky (2014), who argued that Kudelia's analysis overestimated the importance of local factors and understated the importance of Russia's actions for the outbreak of the conflict. Kudelia (2014b; 2014c) responded with two follow-ups, reinforcing his original arguments. A second debate started in early 2019 with a policy memo by Jesse Driscoll (2019), who argued that embracing the label of civil war and focusing on local grievances could pave the way to conflict resolution in eastern Ukraine. In response, Tymofii Brik (2019) and Ivan Gomza (2019) published memos that disagreed with Driscoll's proposal and stressed Russia's role in the conflict.

These two debates represent a divide that cuts through many books and academic journal articles on the Donbas conflict. One group of scholars stresses the importance of local factors and, either implicitly or explicitly, characterizes the Donbas conflict as a civil war, in which Russia is involved to a limited extent by providing some support to local rebels (Sakwa 2015; McDermott 2016; Plekhanov 2016; Matveeva 2017; Tsygankov 2015; Davies 2016; Katchanovski 2016; Loshkariov and Sushentsov 2016; Robinson 2016; Sotiriou 2016; Strasheim 2016; Zhukov 2016; Matsuzato 2017; Giuliano 2018). Another group makes the opposite argument by stressing Russian agency and, either implicitly or explicitly, labeling the conflict as an interstate war between Russia and Ukraine, in which local actors play a secondary, auxiliary role (Wilson 2014; Wynnyckyj 2019; Bukkvoll 2016; Galeotti 2016; Wilson 2016; Kuzio 2017; Landwehr 2019; Bowen 2019; Hosaka 2019; Kuromiya 2019; Mykhnenko 2020).

Why it Matters

Contradicting characterizations of the Donbas conflict should not be dismissed as abstract and inconsequential academic disputes.

On the contrary, the described divide in the academic literature has important implications for both further research and policy making. It has a knock-on effect that leads to further divergence in four areas.

Firstly, the characterization of events in the Donbas has direct policy implications for conflict resolution efforts. Labelling the conflict as a civil war would imply that the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics" (DNR and LNR) are entities with a considerable degree of autonomy which are able to agree or reject a peace settlement according to their own preferences. In this case, negotiations between the Kyiv authorities and representatives of the DNR and LNR would be the only feasible road to peace. Attempts to negotiate with Moscow or putting pressure on the Russian leadership would be a futile exercise. Labelling the conflict as interstate would imply that the reverse is the case. Negotiations with the DNR and LNR would be negotiations with Moscow through an agent who pretends to act independently. This would not only complicate proceedings; it would also raise the possibility that, after a settlement is reached, the DNR and LNR will continue to undermine the Ukrainian state on Moscow's behalf from within. For this reason, direct negotiations with the Russian leadership, potentially combined with sustained economic pressure, would appear like the more promising road to peace in an interstate conflict scenario.

Secondly, the characterization of the Donbas conflict affects the way in which scholars and policy makers view the Ukrainian state. Primacy of domestic conflict causes emphasizes fragility. It suggests that Ukraine has been torn apart by internal contradictions which have deep roots in the country's history and societal structure. Primacy of foreign intervention, on the other hand, emphasizes resilience. It suggests that Ukraine has been able to contain aggressive actions by its neighbor despite its own internal challenges.

Thirdly, the characterization of the Donbas conflict also affects the way in which scholars and policy makers look at Russia and its relations with its neighbors. Limited support for a local rebel movement points toward a different foreign policy than a covert attack on a neighboring country. The former suggests that Russia plays a

restrained and reactive role in its neighborhood. The latter suggests that it is a serious security threat.

Finally, the characterization of events in the Donbas affects how the war is used for comparative research on armed conflict. This is particularly relevant in relation to armed conflict datasets, such as the Correlates of War Project (Sarkees and Wayman 2010; Palmer et al. 2015; Dixon and Sarkees 2015) or the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019). These datasets are used by many scholars as a basis for quantitative research. Hence, the correct coding of the Donbas conflict in these datasets is an issue of data quality. A civil war between the Ukrainian authorities and local rebels would be included in different research projects than an interstate war between Ukraine and Russia. In turn, the presence or absence of the Ukrainian case will have an impact on the results of these projects. This is particularly relevant for comparative research on interstate war, which has become a rare phenomenon with relatively few contemporary cases.

How This Volume Contributes

Against this backdrop, the purpose of the present volume is two-fold. On the one hand, it aims to provide an introduction to the Donbas conflict and illustrate the key points of contention in the academic debate to those readers who are new to the topic. On the other hand, it aims to contribute new material to the academic literature on the characterization of the conflict. Contributions to this volume propose new arguments and frameworks, some of which support one side in the existing divide while others aim to bridge the gap. This will add value for expert readers with extensive prior knowledge. To meet both objectives and benefit subject matter experts as well as readers who are new to the topic, the lineup of this volume includes new contributions as well as previously published texts. It is divided into three parts.

The first part consists of two contributions that focus on the conflict's internal dimension. Ulrich Schneckener starts off by providing a thorough chronological overview of the initial two years of the conflict, which he divides into four phases—formation,

escalation, consolidation, and frozen conflict. He then moves on to critique two conceptual frameworks that are often used by scholars and analysts who emphasize the international dimension of the conflict. These frameworks comprise the concept of a Russian *hybrid war* against Ukraine on the one hand and the concept of a *geopolitical* power struggle between Russia and the West on the other. Schneckener argues that both of these conceptual approaches exaggerate the degree of foreign control over the rapidly evolving situation and overlook local agency. Instead, he proposes a “perspective based on conflict sociology, which takes the internal momentum of the process seriously and begins with the analysis of events ‘on the ground.’” On the basis of this approach, he argues that the war developed its own local dynamic in which the actors involved had significant agency of their own.

Maximilian Kranich adds a theoretical framework that emphasizes one specific aspect of this local dynamic. He argues that identity politics in the Donbas played a key role in the outbreak of violence. His contribution highlights the importance of the myth of the “Soviet fighter” who protects his homeland from a “fascist other.” According to Kranich’s analysis, this identity template, which draws on the experience of World War II, resonated with a “critical mass” of the local population in 2014 and motivated it to take up arms against the new Kyiv authorities. Although Kranich acknowledges that Russian political elites and media played a key role in the dissemination of this identity template to the local population, his analysis suggests that the physical escalation dynamic on the ground was driven by local actors.

The second part of this volume presents two counterarguments to these points. Sanshiro Hosaka uses the typology of the Correlates of War armed conflict database to reassess the categorization of the Donbas conflict. His analysis of Ukrainian casualty figures and reports of Russian armed forces activity in the Donbas comes to the conclusion that “the bulk of the fighting” in the Donbas was carried out by Russia’s regular army rather than paramilitary local formations. Hosaka acknowledges that most intrastate conflicts feature external intervention. However, he argues that, in the case of the Donbas, the peaks of violence that followed the Russian armed forces’ direct involvement are the episodes that

ultimately define the category of the conflict. When a country-intervener takes over the bulk of the fighting from non-state actors, the war ceases to be intrastate and has to be recategorized as interstate.

Nikolay Mitrokhin adds that Russia played a determining role in the conflict long before it sent its regular armed forces. His analysis comes to the conclusion that Moscow was controlling the actors who were responsible for the outbreak of violence in the first place. He argues that the driving force behind the outbreak of the war was an alliance of Russia's intelligence agencies with Russian nationalist fringe organizations and organized crime networks from the Donbas. When these actors failed to achieve the Kremlin's objective, Russia adjusted its strategy – initially by increasing the influx of irregular military units and military hardware and later through the deployment of its regular army. This argument implies that Russian intervention overshadowed internal momentum and local identity as the primary cause of the conflict from its very beginning.

The third part of this volume reflects on the controversy illustrated in the previous parts and in the wider academic literature. It consists of three contributions that try to take into account both sides of the debate while focusing on the way forward. Each text proposes ideas to bridge the divide between advocates of domestic and external conflict dynamics.

My own contribution argues that the appropriate label of the Donbas conflict depends on the degree of Russian control over the separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. The question is not whether the war is purely internal or interstate, but which of the two components outweighs the other. Did Russia intervene in an internal conflict by supporting rebel formations or did it delegate an interstate conflict by creating and controlling local militias that acted on its behalf? I argue that the introduction of delegated interstate war as an addition to armed conflict typologies could focus the academic debate on this question. While this would not necessarily lead to consensus, it would improve the transparency of either side's argument.

Yuriy Matsiyevsky recapitulates the divide in the current academic debate and identifies weak spots in the arguments of both civil and interstate war advocates. In response, he proposes to fine tune the assessment of the conflict's causes in a way that combines

both domestic and foreign variables. He extracts eight explanatory factors from the academic literature, which include both internal and external causes. Matsiyevsky suggests that a comprehensive explanation of the Donbas conflict should consist of a weighted combination of these factors. He then applies this approach by conducting a survey among Ukrainian experts who assign a relative weight to each identified explanatory variable.

Tymofii Brik reflects on the general state of social science research in and on Ukraine. He identifies three general shortcomings: Firstly, researchers need to be more cautious when using information from mass media. Secondly, researchers need to pay more attention to paradigm shifts instead of relying on outdated “common knowledge.” Thirdly, researchers need to pay more attention to local context instead of adopting one-size-fits-all approaches. According to Brik, addressing these shortcomings could significantly improve future research on the Donbas conflict.

Finally, the conclusion briefly discusses the findings and implications of each chapter. It provides a condensed summary of how the individual contributions relate to each other and how they contribute to the wider academic debate. In addition, it highlights remaining gaps and avenues for further research.

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Part I
The Internal Dimension
of the Conflict

