



Why the Donbas War Was Never Civil

Description

Why the Donbas War Was Never “Civil” : Over ten years ago, the Russo-Ukrainian War, which began with Russia’s illegal occupation of Crimea on February 20, 2014, turned into a violent armed conflict.

Yet public commentators who are sympathetic towards Ukraine and condemn Russia’s large-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, remain ambivalent regarding the conflict’s history.

Either through Russian propaganda, theoretical preconceptions, or simple naivety, numerous foreign observers continue to make sharp distinctions between the fighting in Ukraine before and after this date.

The Donbas War was one of several instances of Russian attempts to take control of the predominantly Russian eastern and southern parts of Ukraine. Initially, the Kremlin intended to [accomplish this](#) with minimal military combat.

The most well-known aspect of this operation was Russia’s annexation of Crimea between February 20 and March 18, 2014.

The attempt to capture all of what Russian nationalists call Novorossiiia (New Russia) included a multitude of other simultaneous actions designed to undermine social cohesion, political stability, and state capacity in eastern and southern Ukraine and beyond.

Among the essential instruments of Russia’s hybrid war in mainland Ukraine in early 2014 were Russian and Ukrainian mass media outlets under the influence of Russian or pro-Russian actors.

Yet the effect of Moscow’s demonization campaign on East Ukrainian public opinion remained limited. Both Russian propaganda channels and foreign mass media portrayed the pro-Russian demonstrations in the Donbas as expressions of allegedly widespread popular moods.

However, various opinion polls conducted before and during this time paint a different picture. In March 2014, for instance, only one-third of the residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions [supported the separation](#)

of the Donbas from Ukraine, while 56 percent rejected this idea.

Many of the separatist actions in east and south Ukrainian cities were not initiated locally but instead instigated, directed, and financed by Moscow.

While tensions were already high in early April 2014, large-scale fighting only started in the second week of the month. This new stage of confrontation featured the use of firearms and the omnipresence of Russian citizens.

The Donbas War began on April 12, when separatists led by Russian fighters seized administrative buildings in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk of Donetsk Oblast. The first large-scale fighting of the Russo-Ukrainian War followed the seizure of Sloviansk.

The anti-Ukrainian fighters in Sloviansk were led by retired Colonel and former FSB officer Igor Girkin (alias “Strelkov”). Girkin’s armed group of fifty-plus fighters had just arrived in mainland Ukraine—via Russia—from the already occupied Crimea, where most of these men had participated in the annexation operation.

Girkin’s group played a decisive role in transforming the Donbas regional civil conflict into a delegated inter-state war between Russia and Ukraine.

In an interview for the Russian far-right weekly *Zavtra* (Tomorrow) in November 2014, Girkin admitted: “I pulled the trigger for the war.

If our unit had not crossed the border, everything would have turned out the way it did in Kharkiv and Odesa...[T]he impetus for the war, which is still going on today, was given by our unit. We shuffled all the cards that were on the table. All of them!”

How Moscow Guided Ukraine’s So-Called “Separatists”

On April 13, Acting Ukrainian President Oleksandr Turchynov announced the start of a so-called “anti-terrorist operation” (ATO). The Ukrainian government’s initial decision to launch the defensive operation as an anti-terrorist rather than a military one can also be interpreted as evidence of an intra-state rather than international conflict.

Yet, Turchynov made this decision on pragmatic rather than paradigmatic grounds since the prevention of separatism is covered by Ukraine’s counter-terrorism legislation rather than defense-related laws.

In April 2014, Kyiv was unwilling to announce martial law ahead of the presidential elections scheduled for May 2014, which would have had to be canceled under a state of emergency.

Several scholarly investigations of the pre-history, outbreak, and course of the Donbas War have disclosed and analyzed multiple connections between seemingly independent irregular anti-Ukrainian actors in eastern Ukraine and Russian state organs, whether in Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, Simferopol, or elsewhere.

The Germany-based Russian historian Nikolay Mitrokhin was among the first prominent academics to point, in an article called “Transnational Provocation,” to the crucial role not only of Russian irregular actors but also of the Russian state in the outbreak of the putatively civil Donbas War.

Later on, Japanese political scientist Sanshiro Hosaka, with his articles, e.g., “Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War,” and German researcher Jakob Hauter, with his book *Russia’s Overlooked Invasion*, among other analysts, confirmed and supported Mitrokhin’s early indications.

Before detailed empirical investigations into the involvement of the Russian state, the latter appeared as the most plausible explanation for the outbreak of the war.

From its start, the larger political context of the military escalation in Donbas in the spring of 2014 was suggestive. It could have hardly been a coincidence that war had been in the making and eventually broke out during the same period when Russian troops were capturing Crimea while Russia was accelerating a multidirectional hybrid attack against mainland Ukraine.

A strange aspect of the seeming “rebellion” in the Donbas was that, from the beginning, it never included any well-known political leaders or relevant political organizations from the region.

How Russian Regular Forces Intervened in the Donbas War

Currently, Russia vehemently denies that its regular troops were actively involved in the conduct of the Donbas War on the ground. This was primarily the case until late August 2014.

Yet, apart from the crucial role of Russian regular troops in the annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014, several instances in dryland Ukraine indicate the presence of not only irregular but also regular Russian soldiers.

The most infamous exception was the crew of a Buk TELAR self-propelled, surface-to-air missile system of the Russian Air Defence forces which entered east Ukrainian territory in July 2014 and accidentally shot down the Malaysian Airlines passenger flight MH-17, which was flying over the Donbas with 298 civilians on board.

At the same time, during which smaller Russian regular detachments similar to the Buk unit, the Russian army started shooting across the border on Ukrainian troops.

In July 2014, several rocket and artillery attacks on Ukrainian positions from Russian territory were captured in both photos and videos. The first such attack occurred on July 11 near the village of Zelenopillya in Luhansk Oblast, resulting in the deaths of thirty Ukrainian soldiers and border guards.

In a report published in December 2016, the famous OSINT group Bellingcat described Russian shelling of Ukraine on at least 149 separate occasions.

The following month, Russia eventually invaded mainland Ukraine on a large scale. On August 14, 2014, a large column of at least two dozen armored personnel carriers and other vehicles of the Russian army crossed the Russian-Ukrainian border.

This was the first massive intrusion of Russian regular forces into mainland Ukraine, confirmed by

independent observers. By late August, up to eight regular so-called “battalion tactical groups” (BTGs) of Russia’s armed forces had been deployed to the territory of Ukraine, with over 6,000 personnel.

Setting the Narrative Straight

Nevertheless, many politicians, journalists, diplomats, and even some scholars across the globe still unwittingly follow the Kremlin’s propaganda narrative on the Donbas War.

Media, political, academic, civic, and other commentators must ensure they understand the origins and nature of the war. Politicians, diplomats, and other actors interested in Ukraine’s future should explicitly and continuously emphasize in their public and non-public statements that the armed conflict in the Donbas in 2014-2022 was a delegated inter-state war between Russia and Ukraine and not an intra-Ukrainian civil war.

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