



SOURCES OF MODERN RUSSIAN-UKRAINE WAR: DONETSK DIMENSION

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Abstract

The article describes the origin and the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict in the east of Ukraine in 2014. The conditions for the emergence of this conflict are defined. It proves the leading role of Russia as a principal organiser and executor of the war against Ukraine. It addresses the lack of effort by the West to confront Russian aggression.

Key words: geopolitical grounds, east Ukraine, Donetsk region, Russian aggression, Ukraine-Russia war, “Donetsk People’s Republic”

Further escalation of the conflict, or in fact, the war, in the eastern Ukraine confronts researchers with the need to find out the origins of this situation, including its geopolitical background. This is the purpose of our scientific research. Achieving this purpose involves implementation of such tasks as the definition of the conditions for conflict resolution, and proving the leading role of Russia as the organiser and key executor of the war against Ukraine. The implementation of these tasks relies on the documents issued by the central government and local authorities, media information and the author’s own observations.

In December 2013, it seemed that the idea of splitting Ukraine was **not popular, unlike in 2004**. Dissatisfaction with the current government was very deep, though sufficiently hidden in the public discourse of Donbas¹. In the towns of Donbas from late November 2013, their own “euromaidans” took place. In Donetsk, particularly every day in the evening, 50-60 participants gathered, and on Sundays – up to 300. Meetings were entirely peaceful; the police treated their participants kindly, but, in general, the residents of Donetsk shared a predominantly negative attitude to the Kiev ‘maidan’.

In the Donbas, there have always been pro-Russian sympathies, especially on an emotional level. Until recently, these sympathies had not moved into the sphere of political separatism. They were expressed mainly through the vote for the Party of Regions, which, conventionally, was considered pro-Russian. Besides, sympathy for the “northern neighbour” and the Soviet past was expressed in the Donetsk region in the form of support for the openly pro-Russian Communist Party. But, both political parties operated within the Ukrainian legal domain and could not act against the territorial integrity of the state.

The events of early March 2014, when thousands of people who were in favour of union with Russia started going out in the central streets of Donetsk, seemed illogical and ungrounded. Earlier, the Russian tricolour banner sometimes appeared in the streets of Donetsk, but it had never been a mass phenomenon. Suddenly, everything changed: masses of people appeared who had never been seen before. There were grounds to say that, in Ukraine, a special operation had begun that was carefully planned and prepared in advance, based on qualitative consideration of the local realities. We now know that these scenarios were developed in the last few years and, perhaps, it was planned to implement them after the presidential elections of 2015. However, the February events

¹ Я. Грицак, *Знову про можливий розкол України. Критика*, <http://krytyka.com/ua/articles/znovu-pro-mozhlyvy-roskol-ukrayi>.

on Independence Square (Maidan) accelerated the beginning of the raid². On the part of the local authorities and local governments and, especially, the law enforcement bodies, there were no clear, effective and thoughtful actions to oppose separatist forces. Calls were made for the unity of Ukraine, but no effective steps in this direction were taken.

Subversive work, which was conducted among residents of the region, was clearly aimed at creating the mythology of both the Russian realities (high salaries and pensions) and of “fears” traditional for eastern Ukraine - Bandera, fascists ... In February, they were supplemented by myths about the “Right Sector” “which supposedly is going to Donbas to take revenge on its residents for Yanukovich. Again, the language issue surfaced, although most residents of Donetsk were aware that the Russian language had never been threatened there.

The NGO “Donetsk Institute of Social Research and Political Analysis” (director V.Kipen) conducted an opinion poll in Donetsk in March 2014. Donetsk inhabitants then demonstrated a high level of interest in political events occurring in the country and the city. Three-quarters of respondents (77%) identified their interest in these events as stable and high. 34% of the citizens of Donetsk tended to trust the Ukrainian media in covering the events, 24% - the Russian ones. Such a distribution of trust in the information sources fully reflects the fragility of the public opinion, which was formed in conditions of information warfare.

Half of Donetsk residents then spoke for preserving the unitary structure of Ukraine. Of these, 31% of the unitary government supporters believed that regions should be given broader economic and tax powers. There were 16% who saw the future of Donetsk region within Ukraine, but with the authority extended to the status of a federation subject. In total, there were 66% who supported the unity of Ukraine. There were 27% who supported the Donetsk region joining the Russian Federation, including those who spoke for the actual entry of Ukraine into an alliance similar to the Soviet Union. And only 5% saw the region as a separate state formation.

Donetsk residents, for the most part, felt themselves unprotected. The events that unfolded in the city in March 2014 left an obvious mark: 31% of respondents said that life in the city was “restless”, 20% rated it as “dangerous”, and 34% believed that life in general had become more difficult and more depressing. In this situation, the Donetsk residents, in fact, had no one to rely on: the level of trust in the security forces was very low. Courts and prosecutors were the leaders of distrust among Donetsk residents: no more than 10% of Donetsk people trusted them. Locals had a little more confidence in the Security Service and the police. The army had the greatest confidence, but the share of those who did not trust it, in general, was as low as that of the SBU.

There was no unity in the perception of pro-Russian rallies and meetings in support of the unity of Ukraine. Although the overall distribution of responses shows a greater tendency of public opinion to support the rally participants for a unified Ukraine; it cannot be said that there was an unequivocal dominance of supporters of a particular point of view.

However, the thesis of the Donetsk residents’ predominant orientation to Russia was not confirmed by the distribution of answers to the question of identity. Clear patriotic feelings, in general, were characteristic of more than a third of Donetsk residents. Close to them is a large group (21%) of Donetsk residents that identified themselves as “Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine.” In total, this amounted to 58% of Donetsk’s population. A third of respondents cared for Russia³.

It is worth mentioning that the pro-Russian movement began several years ago. In 2005, an unregistered organisation “Donetsk Republic” began to operate. Its pro-Russian activists staged rallies, which were attended by a few dozen people. The situation had changed radically in early April 2014, when together with Russian tricolour banners, tricolour flags of the “Donetsk Republic” appeared in large numbers. On 7 April, radical separatists acting according to the Moscow scenario and coordinated by the Russian secret services, declared a so-called “People’s Council of Donbas” in a captured building of the

² Т. Возняк, *Паралельні сценарії подій в Україні взимку 2013-2014 рр. Путін частково все-таки здійснив свій план демонтажу України. Портал Zahid.NET*, http://zaxid.net/news/showNews.do?paralelni_stsenariyi_podiy_v_ukrayini_vzimku_20132014_rr&objectId=1332169.

³ Почти 66 % жителей Донецка хотят жить в единой Украине – соцопрос, <http://www.ostro.org/general/politics/news/442124/>.

Donetsk Regional State Administration, and held a fake “extraordinary session” which adopted the illegal and unconstitutional decision to establish a so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” and its accession to the Russian Federation.

Donetsk Oblast Council requested Donetsk residents to remain prudent and not to succumb to provocations. It advocated a peaceful and legal settlement of the crisis in the Donbas⁴. Donetsk city council also made an official statement that it did not recognise the so-called “People’s Council of Donbas”, which announced the creation of the “Donetsk People’s Republic”⁵.

However, there was an actual betrayal of law enforcement officers who did not oppose the seizure of administrative buildings and taunted the members of pro-Ukrainian rallies. Many of the senior officers of the SBU regional management were recruited by Russia. In fact, this structure in the Donetsk region in fact worked for another state⁶.

From April 2014, towns of Donetsk and Lugansk regions were actually occupied. There were no state flags, even over the administrative buildings that were not captured. All exits from the towns were controlled by the DPR’s block posts.

Actions of the pro-separatist protesters were given a formal assessment by the police: they were qualified as a crime against the national security of Ukraine (according to the prosecutor’s office in the Donetsk region). The radical actions of the pro-Russian extremists were also condemned by the scientific elite of Donbas. In the programme “Questions of the authority” on the TV channel “Donbas”, it was noted that the main purpose of Russia, which was pushing Donetsk separatists to radicalism, was to eliminate Ukrainian statehood. All actions of local separatists on declaring an independent state “Donetsk Republic”, holding a referendum and appeals to the Russian Federation to bring its troops to the territory of Donetsk Oblast, were illegitimate and subject to the relevant articles of the Criminal Code of Ukraine⁷.

In general, except tricolour flags and piles of garbage in the square in front of the Donetsk Regional State Administration, as well as the hysterical cries of pro-Russian activists on social networks, Donetsk continued to live its normal life in April 2014: people went to work and enjoyed the spring⁸. There were two parallel realities. However, in late April, the situation changed radically. They began to cross. Much was made by Russian propaganda. The trapped airwaves of the regional TV and radio company broadcast the Russian channels. Even then, it was clear that the presidential election would not be held in the region. While the then chairman of RSA, S. Taruta, said that everything was fine until the last moment. The camouflaged men with weapons began to walk openly in the streets. And many Donetsk residents were willing to accept any lie by Putin. On 11 May, the fake referendum on the “independence” of the Donetsk People’s Republic was held, which could not (or would not) be prevented by the constitutional state and local authorities. Some officials even secretly supported the separatists. Many people came to the polling stations (in estimates, about a third of voters). Some of the interest can be explained by a number of factors. These include nostalgia for the Soviet Union, following the social model that prevailed there. A generation of people was brought up on this. And such ideas were actively reproduced in the Donetsk region. The “referendum” was attended not only by the elderly, although they constituted the basis for the DPR electorate.

It is likely that, by the end of April, Putin (and it is he who takes decisions in the Russian Federation) had not decided on the final approach. In many ways, his decisions (based on the global political goals) were and are impulsive. There was wavering: either occupation and annexation on the model of the Crimea, or the self-proclaimed republic which is, de facto, under the control of Russia. Further developments showed that the second viewpoint won. The tactical purpose of keeping the stable instability in Ukraine was realised⁹.

⁴ Донецька обласна рада. Офіційний сайт, <http://sovnet.donbas.com/index.php?lang=ru&sec=01&iface>.

⁵ Официальный сайт городского головы и городского совета г. Донецка, <http://www.lukyanchenko.donetsk.ua/>.

⁶ Переживет ли Донбасс пресинг России // Панорама. - 2014. - 24 апреля.

⁷ Вопрос власти. Сайт телеканала «Донбасс», <http://voprosvlasti.donbas.tv/vvlasti/view/2014/04/07/17266/>.

⁸ Веб-ресурс «Твоя правда», <http://tvoyapravda.com>.

⁹ *Workers fear for the future in Ukraine’s industrial east*. Сайт газети «Гардіан», <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/26/ukraine-workers-fear-future-heavily-industrialised-east>.

It is already impossible to convince the majority of those who took the pro-Russian position. These people are in a state of altered reality and painful consciousness and aggressively defend their image of the world from any attempt at intervention. "Image" is established by the Russian channels, local press and the Party of Regions, which has long worked on churning out the stereotypes "we'll die without Russia", "decaying Europe", "Donbas feeds Ukraine" and the like. The most aggressive part of the population operates on pseudo facts that cannot be challenged, as they are unprovable. Professional psychiatrists characterise such behaviour as mass psychopathology.

From the beginning of the crisis in the east, there were discussions suggesting that Ukraine does not need the problematic Donbas. However, it is not just the fate of Donbas, but the statehood of Ukraine as such which is at stake. If Putin "swallows" Donbas, he will not stop. The myth of "Novorossia" was not randomly created.

Pro-Russian, or rather – pro-Soviet sentiments have always been present in different regions of Ukraine; in the Donbas, however, they were more common, although of hidden character. However, these positions could not take clear shape without outside interference. Separatist performances were carefully prepared.

In Russia, in our view, there are two main motives for aggression in Ukraine. They are supplemented by the personal complexes and offences of Putin. Global motive is his perception of himself as a kind of messiah, restoring the former empire, geographically as well.

Global understanding of his mission is also to show his enemy, the West, that Russia may ignore it. The purpose of Putin's third term is the empire's reintegration.

During the post-Soviet period, Russia was trying to decide what it should be like: the imperialist power that everyone fears, or the country that primarily deals with social welfare. President Putin seems to have solved this problem in favour of an ambitious expansion policy. Prosperity is good, but only for the time being, because it creates people who think independently and who can vote to overthrow their ruler. Large-scale plans on the international scene seemed safer, at least for the Russian authorities. But it is not possible to escape from the economic problems. The Russian public was pleased by the propaganda about the Crimea

as a free gift, but it is more like shopping in a store without price tags. Disappointment awaits at the checkout point, as stores that do not show the prices are usually very expensive¹⁰.

Such unhealthy fixation on a neighbouring country indicates the depth of the post-imperial trauma. Ukrainians were too close, too similar for Russia to allow them to just go away. Throughout 24 years of independence, Ukrainian statehood was perceived as a misunderstanding, a joke; this word in Russia is usually pronounced with ironic overtones.

In fact, in Russia, for century after century, the various forms of social estate slavery were reproduced: from serfdom to the Soviet registration and current corporate state, and not only ordinary residents, but also privileged classes are part of the state slavery. Under these conditions, a society develops resentment, lack of demand, unrecognised talent. On the other hand, for about a century, Russia has been copying the West, dissociating itself from this imitation. Russia either sees itself as Cinderella, unjustly forgotten by her stepmother and sisters, or it presents itself as a nation-victim, whose body saves the world from destruction: from the Mongol-Tatar yoke or "fascist hordes." One of the main propaganda myths of Putin's era was the "theory of Russia's defeat", starting with "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century", which was the collapse of the USSR.

The West tried to integrate Russia into their institutions, offering it a privileged partnership with both NATO and the EU. But Russia did not use the open window of opportunities, repeating the mantra of insult and humiliation.

The teenage complexes of the Russian authorities, the elite's childish disappointment in the West and the population's social infantilism gave birth to the myth of "Ukrainian fascism". Ukraine was declared a traitor, and its betrayal seemed even more offensive, as the Ukrainians were considered those who belong to them, to the Slavic family, by their blood. The image of fascism as a synonym for the absolute, final evil is typical of Russian propaganda. Russia's war in Ukraine is an example of anti-policy, pure negativity, based on self-inferiority, compensation for the elite's inferiority complex towards the West and the population concerning the circumstances of their

¹⁰ New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/world>.

lives. The government cannot change the role of Russia in the international arena through “soft power”, quality economic growth, and cannot achieve the respect and recognition of partners. The vast majority of the population, locked within Putin’s restored estate system, cannot go beyond the state paternalism (essentially, caste slavery) and social parasitism, and the helplessness syndrome. Creating a fictional enemy in the person of Ukraine and imaginary victories - the annexation of the Crimea and the creation of the Donetsk and Lugansk pirate republics served as a symbolic compensation¹¹.

Thus, the current behaviour of **President Putin** is aimed at the destruction of international law, the “revival” of imperial Russia as a threat to the world. The consolidated West (the EU, NATO, the US, Japan, Australia, Brazil, South Korea and other countries with liberal democracy) must realise that Ukraine needs their real protection, for protecting Ukraine they protect themselves. In fact, Ukraine is an arena where the civilised world is struggling with the modern Empire of Evil. Drastic and unexpected measures are required. Traditional sanctions fail. Russia, in its imperial haze, is ready to suffer economic costs for it understands only the language of force.

¹¹ С. Медведев, *Русский ресентимент*. Сайт журнала «Отечественные записки», <http://www.strana-oz.ru/2014/6>.