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Ukrainian and Russian Relations: An Analysis of the Post-Donbas Crisis

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Abstract: The article aims to assess the relationship between Ukraine and Russia since the Donbas crisis. The regional rivalry between Ukraine and Russia has largely contributed to the instability of Eastern Europe. The article describes the concerns of the geopolitical game of influence between the West, led by the United States, and Russia. The article explores Ukraine's eastern border conflict as a live myth-making process. The study used the empirical and theoretical literature to find the objectives of this research. This article outlines the objectives of the Donbas region crisis output, Ukraine and Russia relations, and the EU sanctions against Russia, comparing the expectations of the political, economic and cultural aspects. The new conflict between Ukraine and Russia validates a new kind of geopolitical adventurism and blurs both the territorial and imaginary borders of the Russian state. As a result, the Ukrainian eastern crisis in the Donbas region has highlighted the fragility of the Russian national identity and the incompleteness of the Russian administration.

Keywords: Donbas Region, Ukraine, Russia, Geo-Politics, Regional Crisis, Security, NATO and USA

Introduction

The borders of the Donbas were sometimes fortified with little more than sandbags and makeshift wooden plank gun emplacements. Ukrainian separatists will tell you that they are stopping the expansion of a NATO[1] alliance that threatens to sink Russia and leave it defenceless. Troops from both sides have been fighting on opposite sides of this line of contact since a ceasefire ended large-scale fighting in 2015, though the deadly war has continued ever since. But in recent months, Europe's most dangerous conflict has threatened to resurface, putting the future of millions of Ukrainians in grave doubt. New concentrations of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border raised fears of an invasion. They support Russia's attempt to negotiate a new sphere of influence in Ukraine by demanding a US (United States of America) guarantee

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[1] The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was created in 1949 by the United States, Canada, and several Western European nations to provide collective security against the Soviet Union.

that Ukraine will never join NATO, a request the US has rejected, and progress on Donbas. Ukraine is one of the regions to which Russia attaches the greatest importance. Among the reasons for this are the fact that Kievan Rus, where the Russians appeared on the stage of history, is located on the territory of Ukraine, that Crimea plays a crucial role in Russian maritime policies, and that there is a significant amount population in Ukraine. Ukraine was under the sovereignty of Tsarist Russia and then the Soviet Union until the early 1990s.

Relations between Russia and Ukraine – and, indeed, the United States and Europe – have been tense since 2014. In that year, Russia not only annexed Crimea, which is Ukrainian territory but also supported a separatist movement in Donbas, a region that includes Donetsk and Luhansk, the two easternmost regions of Ukraine, which share a border with Russia. Fourteen thousand people have died as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine, which arose in the wake of the country's Euromaidan revolution in 2013. There are more than thousands of people from Donbas who have been displaced, fleeing to Ukraine and Russia. However, thousands of Ukrainian citizens continue to cross the line of contact between the uncontrolled territories of Donbas and Ukraine almost every day. The current situation comes after eight years of war in Ukraine and with, in addition to Vladimir Putin, a new group of leaders on all sides. Since the war broke out in 2014, the two breakaway territories in Donbas, which are not officially recognized by any national government, including Russia's, have been more fully integrated into Russian control. A series of mysterious arrests, deaths and disappearances of self-proclaimed civil servants and field commanders in the territories has been followed by the appointment of figures with closer ties to Moscow. Although Moscow has increased control, the territories remain a grey area for civil and workers' rights, as well as shady and criminal businesses. More than 700,000 Russian passports have already been issued to residents of the territories, which Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called a sign of annexation (Open Democracy, 2022).

In Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy came to power in 2019 during a campaign that promised peace. Relations between his predecessor Petro Poroshenko and Putin were respectful, although Poroshenko fought a difficult campaign against Russia. Zelenskyy, on the other hand, is not believed to have the same level of authority as the Kremlin and has taken a series of actions against Russian interests in the country. These include sanctions against pro-Russian TV channels and a criminal investigation into Viktor Medvedchuk, an oligarch close to Putin. Today, the country enjoys closer political, economic, and security relations with the United States, United Kingdom, and EU states. In this research, the current and future regional and possible effects of the 2013 Ukraine Maidan events will be analysed. In the first part of this comprehensive study, the brief history of Ukraine until the dissolution of the Soviet Union will be described. In the second part, the trends of Ukraine's foreign policy from its independence to the current crisis will be studied. In the third part of the study, the regional and global effects, as well as the current and possible effects of the Maidan Events, which broke out in November 2013 and the second phase of the new crisis whose effects are still being felt in various aspects, will be analysed. In the conclusions, part of the study, some determinations, key results of this research and predictions about the crisis understudy will be made. A build-up of Russian military forces along the border with Ukraine in late 2021 has fuelled fears that Moscow is preparing for a full-scale invasion of its neighbour (Karagiannis, 2016, p. 140–142).

Literature Review

Ukraine continues to exist as a country that has various problems and has failed to balance the different ethnic groups living in it, which has significant differences in ethnic identity, culture, sect and historical development between East and West (Karadeli, 2014, p. 1). Historically, Ukraine has been influenced by Russian civilization and has amalgamated with Eastern European cultures, being culturally shaped by numerous immigrant communities. Furthermore, Ukraine has always been seen as a battlefield by the great powers of the region. Throughout history, Ukraine's communication with the outside world was generally carried out through regional powers (Poles, Russians and Germans). That relationship was always filtered by the interests of those external powers, and that process led to the shaping of Ukraine's national

consciousness according to the perceptions of its neighbours (Büyükakıncı, 2004, p. 402–403). The occupations, civil wars, treaties and migrations experienced by Ukraine, which was at the transition point of many clans and tribes in history, paved the way for the establishment of different regional languages, religions, political and economic understandings in the region (Köroğlu, 2015, p. 34–35). The history of Ukraine has been linked with the great power in the past, that's why the people of the Donbas region find their culture and historical connection with the former USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) (Yıldırım, 2020, p. 300).

It will not be difficult to guess that a great shock and reaction occurred against the Russian administration in western Ukraine. The people of Western Ukraine want better political and economic relations with the European Union. There are thousands of students who have been admitted to Central-European universities and institutions (Bilener, 2007, p. 117). Ukraine's adoption of an announcement with the United States and Russia as an equal party proved to be a momentous foreign policy achievement in terms of Leonid Kravchuk, chosen as president in 1991 with opinions nationalists. Moreover, in this way, the practice of rapprochement with the EU and NATO began (Bilener, 2007, p. 121–122).

Ukraine is not a member of NATO but was promised in 2008 that it would eventually have a chance to join, a move that would bring the US-led alliance to the border with Russia (Walker & Hall, 2022). Since 2014, the Ukrainian government has prioritised further integration with the EU and NATO. In 2019, a new constitutional amendment declared the government responsible for implementing Ukraine's strategic progression towards EU and NATO membership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2019). NATO approved in 2016 Comprehensive Assistance Program (CAP) for Ukraine to implement defence and security sector reforms in line with NATO standards. The CAP includes several trust fund projects to support capacity development and sustainable capacity building in key areas (Congressional Research Service, 2021, p. 16).

The issue of the Crimean Peninsula being part of Ukrainian territory became an issue closely associated with the territorial integrity of this new sovereign state. Due to the influence of the division of this fleet on the balance of power in the Black Sea, this problem had a regional element that affected the coastal states. On the contrary, the demarcation of the borders with the 1997 Russia-Ukraine Border Treaty and the determination of the issues on Crimea and also the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Association allowed Kyiv to enter an era of liberation (Kısacık, 2017, p. 85–86).

Ukraine is a significant geopolitical entity, boasting a territory larger than that of many European states. Dugin mentions that along with discrimination, political sovereignty tendencies are very active in this area. In Dugin's opinion, Ukraine has no geopolitical significance in the context of the state; and it also does not have a sui generis cultural value, geographical originality and ethnic originality in the global framework because the name Ukraine is historically derived from Border Region – Ukraine-Border Lands. With its current borders and its position as a sovereign state, the situation in Ukraine is a blow to the geopolitical security of the Kremlin and amounts to a terrible blow that can be considered on the same level as an intervention on its territory. Advocating that Ukraine should not be allowed to survive any longer, Dugin stresses that Ukraine should be divided into several parts based on geopolitical realities and ethnocultural differences (Dugin, 2004, p. 204–206).

Anna Matveeva characterizes the conflict as a clash of identities as different sections of the Ukrainian population have developed conflicting perspectives on the past, Russia's role in Ukraine's history and how relations with the West should evolve. These differences laid the foundation for what became polarized identities and mutually exclusive ideologies. The article discusses the different facets of this identity, such as localism conditioned by the poor integration of Donbas into the rest of Ukraine, post-Soviet nostalgia and fear of fascism, which may have contributed significantly to the feeling of anti-government in the Donbas and, subsequently, at the beginning of the war (Platonova, 2022, p. 12).

As for the central part of Ukraine, from Chernihiv to Odesa, including Kyiv, where the Malo-Russian ethnicity and language are dominant, Orthodoxy has the advantage in this area. The Orthodox Malorussia in question constitutes an independent geopolitical structure that has cultural kinship with Eastern Ukraine and is located within the Eurasian geopolitical system. Western Ukraine does not have

the characteristics of a homogeneous region: the area in question consists of the Volyn, Galicia and Zakarpattia regions; currently, it shows different situations depending on the ethnic structure and political traditions. According to Dugin, autonomy at significant levels, including political autonomy to a considerable extent, must now be presented to those destructive territories that are anti-Russian and pro-Western because of their break with the Orthodox-based pro-Russian central Ukraine and the land of eastern Ukraine. The strategic borders of Russia in this geography should not be the areas where the Ukraine-Poland, Ukraine-Hungary or Ukraine-Slovakia borders meet. The existing border should be moved further west, at least to the western front of Central Europe and, at best, to the Atlantic further west (Platonova, 2022, p. 206). Energy is a great need for the countries of central Europe. That is why Moscow is important for European countries to strengthen the energy sector in the region. Energy security is necessary for the region because of this relationship with Russia. EU countries do not directly support Ukraine (Caşın, 2015, p. 398). In the post-2004, the EU instigated to following multidimensional and regional programs. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) characterizes the main program of the EU. In the context of ENP, Ukraine developed Action Plans with EU members and was examined by implementation commissions and sub-commissions. The Black Sea Synergy: a new regional cooperation initiative, implements the second program presented by the Union for the former Soviet region. It is one of the key indicators for establishing Ukraine's relationship with the European Union (Hatipoğlu, 2014, p. 91–93).

The Black Sea Synergy policy is seen as a complementary initiative of the Union for the enlargement process with Ankara, the strategic partnership relations with Moscow and the neighbourhood policy. The Eastern Partnership launched at the Prague Summit in 2009[2] embodies the third policy introduced by the EU. Through the enactment of this policy, it aims to

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[2] The Heads of State and the representatives of the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, the representatives of the European Union and the Heads of State or Government and representatives of its member states met in Prague to take

boost relations between the EU, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia. The Eastern Partnership lays the groundwork for far-reaching association pacts and free-trade commitments and henceforth the gradual integration of these countries into the European economy (Kısacık, 2017, p. 104–106). The main objective of the Eastern Partnership is to create the necessary conditions for accelerating political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries. The Ukrainian government didn't miss this opportunity to join the EU's ENP program (Europarl Europa, 2009).

In the academic literature, a myriad of approaches has been taken to explain the conflict in the Donbas. Each assigns primary importance to a different factor or combination of factors. The approaches fall under several important explanatory paradigms: the role of identity and history. The role of local political and business elites, the role of regional socio-economic issues, and the role of Russia. The article advocates for the primacy of history, local ordinary people and their identities and emotions (Platonova, 2022, p. 9).

Theoretical and Methodological Background

Martínez de Murguía (1999) states that a conflict refers to a relationship between two or more organized groups, within a nation or between States that have incompatible interests; which induces them to face each other while trying to achieve their goal. The conflicts are inherent in man's interactions; they derive from the pursuit of incompatible interests. The recurring tension between Ukraine and Russia threatens each other in the Donbas region, which is a major conflict zone in Eastern Europe since 2013. The common people from both states are sharing culture, language, and ancestral routes. That is why local people do not want war in their region. They are very aware of the future and want to progress in their lives (Martínez de Murguía, 1999).

The complexity of diagnosing a crisis is obvious; in this context, the conflict intensity curve is a tool

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their relationship to a new level by establishing the Eastern Partnership.

to simplify the process. The crisis in Ukraine is a particular example of the difficulty of following events properly, in particular, because it is impossible to trace the facts of this crisis from a single point of view. The conflict intensity curve is an instrument for measuring the evolution of a conflict. According to Michael Lund (2009), it is built on the understanding that conflicts have a fundamental life history, they evolve in stages, increasing and decreasing in intensity over time gradually towards war or peace. The theoretical framework used in this research is originally designed as a single-conflict measurement tool (Lund, 2009, p. 288).

Vladimir Rauta focuses on the role of armed non-state actors in the Ukrainian conflict, comparatively assessing the types of military interventions in Crimea and south-eastern Ukraine. His article seeks to provide a theoretical framework that facilitates the distinction between events in the two areas based on the armed groups involved and their external support. He argues that Russia's use of political violence in Ukraine is intended to encourage sovereign defection (breaking up of an existing state), both outward, through the annexation of Crimea, and inward, through foreign sponsorship of the secessionists. rebels in south-eastern Ukraine with the purpose of creating a political buffer zone in the form of an unresolved conflict (Rauta, 2016).

Emmanuel Karagiannis focuses on the Ukrainian volunteer fighters who joined pro-Kyiv battalions to take part in fighting in the eastern part of the country. Although the formation of armed groups is the result of separatist actions, far-right parties have used them to further their political agendas. However, the mobilization and recruitment of volunteer fighters is not an exclusive phenomenon of the Ukrainian extreme right. Dozens of battalions have been formed to defend the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Karagiannis describes the existing literature on militias, which is heavily dominated by rational choice and social sanctions approaches. However, for various reasons, neither applies to the Ukrainian case. Instead, he argues that mobilization mechanisms such as ideas, political-social norms, and emotions can explain why people joined these armed groups. Nationalist ideas have motivated some people to join the campaign against a perceived archaic enemy. Political-social norms have also generated collective action since they can influence behaviours and perceptions. In

addition, Karagiannis brings to the analysis the role of emotions in the recruitment of militiamen. In short, the phenomenon of Ukrainian volunteer fighters carries a strong cognitive-normative-emotional dimension that needs to be taken into account. Building on (Laclau & Mouffe's, 2014) discourse theory, it deals with conceptual frameworks from a variety of other fields i.e. conflict theory, conflict resolution & transformation theory, and participatory theory. The conflict between exclusion and inclusion is permanent and has no definitive resolution. The case of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas region is the best example. Due to the presence of a Russian-speaking minority in the eastern part of Ukraine, there are emotionally attached to pro-Russian sentiments, sympathisers and supporters of the new nation. This conflict is long-lasting and international interest also works there, which is why in near future this conflict doesn't be cured easily (Baysha, 2018).

In liberal democratic theory and constructivism, international law plays a huge role. For liberal democratic theory, the law provides the rules of the road that govern the interaction of the nation-state. Although, with the use of tools of democratic theory there is huge provision to settle down the regional and border conflict between the nations. In the case of the current Donbas crisis both parties are aggressive in the Donbas conflict zone, and the international actor can act to mitigate the recent crisis (Coyle, 2017). In the Donbas region, Russia one-sided want their hegemony in Ukraine's eastern-southern region which is a Russian speaking majority region of the country. The situation in the Donbas region has brutally deteriorated since November 2021 (Jules, 2004, p. 278).

The article's secondary data source is a database of documents available online and statements made by locals at protest rallies and in interviews with print media, built through an Internet search. To locate protest events in Donbas, an English-language Internet search of Google and YouTube was conducted using the following terms: anti-Maidan, protest, pro-Russian, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Donbas. In addition, it searched the following news websites: European Commission, White House, Kyiv Post, Hromadske.ua, Newsru.com, European Union, and Donbas News (Novosti Donbasa).

The Conflict Between Russia and Ukraine: Political, Economic and Cultural Analyses

The independence of Ukraine was the most difficult for the Russian to accept. Many Russians have traditionally viewed much of Ukraine as a historical province of Russia and Ukrainians as close ethnic brothers. In July 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin published an essay that expands on claims he has made earlier about Ukraine's ties to Russia and argues that Russians and Ukrainians are one people. Ukraine was the second most populated and powerful of the fifteen Soviet republics, home to much of the Union's agricultural production, defence industries, and military, including the naval fleet. The Black Sea and part of the nuclear arsenal. Ukraine was so vital to the union that its decision to sever ties in 1991 proved to be a death blow to the ailing superpower. Ukraine has sought to forge its own path as a sovereign state as it seeks to align itself more closely with Western institutions, including the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, Kyiv is struggling to balance its external relations and overcome deep internal divisions. A more nationalistic Ukrainian-speaking population in the western parts of the country generally supported greater integration with Europe, while a largely Russian-speaking community in the east favoured closer ties with Russia. Ukraine became a battleground in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and began arming and inciting separatists in the Donbas region in the southeast of the country. Russia's seizure of Crimea was the first time since World War II that a European state annexed territory from another. More than 14,000 people have been killed in the conflict, the bloodiest in Europe since the Balkan Wars of the 1990s (Masters, 2021).

The Russian traditionally match their way of life with Ukrainian. There have been deep cultural, economic and political ties with Ukraine, and in many ways, Ukraine is central to Russia's identity and vision in the world. The family ties between Ukraine and Russia have been strong and going back centuries. Russia has been keen to preserve its political influence in Ukraine and across the former Soviet Union, particularly after its favoured 2004 Ukrainian presidential candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, lost to a reformist competitor in the popular Orange Revolution movement.

The shock in Ukraine came after a similar electoral defeat for the Kremlin in Georgia in 2003, known as the Rose Revolution, and was followed by another Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Yanukovych later became president of Ukraine in 2010 amid voter discontent with the orange government. Kyiv is the capital of Ukraine since it formed as a nation, and is sometimes referred to as the mother of Russian cities, on a par in terms of cultural influence with Moscow and Saint Petersburg. It was in Kyiv in the 8th and 9th centuries that Christianity was brought from Byzantium to the Slavic peoples. And it was Christianity that served as the anchor of Kievan Rus, the first Slavic state from which modern Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians derive their lineage. The Russian diaspora plays an important role in the Russian interest in the Ukrainian region of Donbas. According to a 2001 census, one of Russia's main concerns is the welfare of the approximately eight million ethnic Russians living in Ukraine, mainly in the south and east. Moscow claimed the duty to protect these people as a pretext for its actions in Ukraine (Masters, 2021).

In the Donbas region, Russia's strategic gains are more fragile. Supporting the separatists has, at least temporarily, increased Russia's bargaining power vis-à-vis Ukraine, but the future of the region is highly uncertain. Fomenting political instability may be Russia's goal until other factors turn in its favour. Ivan Loshkariov and Andrey Sushentsov examine the role of the Russian diaspora in Ukraine, arguing that the country's post-independence political-institutional design was unfavourable to Russians, particularly those living in the eastern and southern regions, and hampered the development of its post-Soviet identity (German, 2016).

The Russian president Vladimir Putin used a similar narrative to justify his support for separatists in south-eastern Ukraine, another region home to large numbers of Russian-speaking and ethnic Russians. He called the region Novorossiya (New Russia), a term that dates back to 18th century Imperial Russia. Armed Russian provocateurs, including some agents of the Russian security services, are said to have played a central role in inciting the rebellion of anti-Euromaidan secessionist movements in the region. Moreover, Russia continues to officially deny its involvement in the Donbas conflict, unlike in the case of Crimea. The United States remains commit-

ted to restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. It does not recognize Russia's claims to Crimea and encourages Russia and Ukraine to resolve the Donbas conflict through the Minsk agreements. President Putin has warned of a genocide in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, where Ukrainian government troops are fighting pro-Russian separatists (European Parliament, 2021). For a long time, the politics of the Donbas region was divided into two main opponents. The main division is characterized by being divided regionally between a pro-European west and a pro-Russian east (Giuliano, 2018).

The scientific and scholarly work shows similar differences in defining the origin of the Donbas conflict. Some scholars describe the conflict as a Russian invasion, from the outset led by Russian military intelligence agents and ideological volunteers. They had crossed the eastern border and made propaganda against Ukraine. However, Russian ethnicities easily understood and embraced the misconception and raised their voices against Ukraine to create a new sovereign state (Czuperski et al., 2015; Mitrokhin, 2014; Sutyagin, 2015). Ivan Katchanovski (2016, p. 9) examines various live broadcasts, videos and media reports, which show that the leaders of the insurgency and members of their armed units were mostly residents of Donbas and other regions of Ukraine. Due to the participation of local people in this conflict against the fighting Ukrainian army, the anti-Ukrainian voice is accelerating. The crisis is developing rapidly in several parts of Donbas and other regions as well (a similar argument is also made by Anna Matveeva (Matveeva, 2016)).

Katchanovski thus characterises the conflict in the Donbas region as a civil war with direct and indirect military intervention by a foreign state (Katchanovski, 2016, p. 11). The Euromaidan revolution and the fight against Russian aggression revealed major identity changes in Ukrainian society. There is a dominant identification with the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian political nation, with a civic identity rather than with ethnic, regional or local identities. These changes are reflected in opinion polls that reveal that the majority of Ukrainians see their country as a unitary state and oppose federalization or separation of part of the Ukrainian territory. This is the case in all regions of the country, including the areas controlled by the Donbas government. In this region, as in other

parts of the country, support for Russian-led military or economic unions has collapsed and the number of supporters of EU and NATO membership has increased (Haran, et. al., 2019).

The figure is showing the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of the eastern border of Ukraine, it is the main battleground between Ukraine and separatist groups. In October-November 2021, reports began to emerge that large contingents of Russian troops were moving near the Ukrainian border, supported by lethal weapons such as tanks and Buk missiles (European Parliament, 2021). Meanwhile, there are several meetings held between the EU and Russia. But the officials' talk has been failing. In mid-January 2022, a series of meetings between the United States, NATO, the OSCE and Russia took place. On January 9–10, 2022, US and Russian officials held talks on strategic stability in Geneva. Despite several meetings between both sides, the problem continues to create something that will happen bigger than the aspects (The White House, 2022).

It's more about what Russia doesn't want. Russia does not want Ukraine in NATO – and said so in its security demand list that was sent to the United States last December. The demands included stopping all NATO exercises near the Russian border. Many of these ultimatums were rejected by the West. In December, Putin said Russia was seeking guarantees that would rule out any further eastward NATO moves and the deployment of weapons systems that threaten us in close proximity to Russian territory. Putin offered the West an opportunity to engage in substantive discussions on the issue, adding that Moscow would need not just verbal assurances, but legal guarantees. Ukraine's admission into the alliance would require the unanimous approval of all thirty member states. The United States and NATO have now answered the calls. Although neither Moscow nor the Western powers have made the details of these responses' public, it has been made clear that Russia's main demands that Ukraine essentially bans NATO membership and a promise that the alliance will not extend further east were rejected (Aljazeera, 2022).

On 21 January 2022 US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, met in Geneva for a further round of talks. While not expecting any breakthroughs, the US administration said it wanted to test whether there was still a path

Figure 1. Map showing the Luhansk and Donetsk conflict zones on the eastern side of the border
Source: https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R45008.pdf.

Figure 2. Map showing the possible axes of advance in Ukraine by the Russian armed forces
Source: https://static.rusi.org/special-report-202202-ukraine-web.pdf.

forward for diplomacy and dialogue (US Department of State, 2022). In his first public comments on the Ukraine crisis since December 2021, President Putin said on February 1, 2022, that the United States was trying to draw Russia into a war over Ukraine as a pretext to impose more sanctions. Following talks with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, President Putin also said that the US and NATO had ignored Russia's major security concerns, but that he remained open to dialogue (The New York Times, 2022).
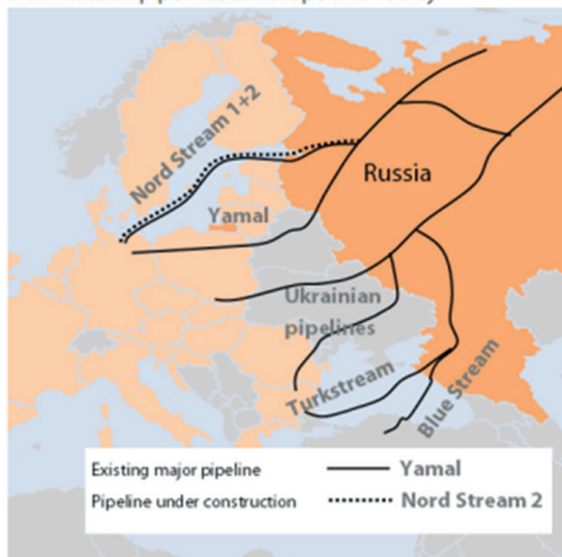
In recent months, President Putin has been accused of weaponizing Russia's gas supply to Europe in order to get the pipeline approved by EU regulators. In July 2021, and in response to continued US concerns over the geopolitical implications of NS2, the US and Germany reached an agreement regarding the pipeline to prevent it from being weaponised (Europarl Europa, 2022).

The largest natural gas reserves are available in the Russian region. The gas pipeline became reality
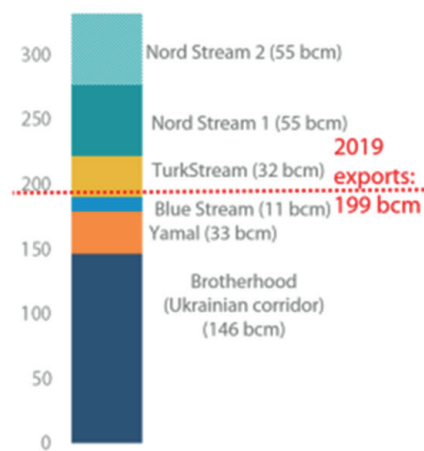

Figure 3. The new Nord Stream 2 pipeline connects Russia to Germany, bypassing Ukraine which is currently a major transit country for Russian gas exports to Europe Source: Gazprom

Figure 4. Main Russian pipelines to Europe and Turkey

in 2011 when it connected between Russia and Germany. Other pipelines include Blue Stream, another underwater pipeline supplying Turkey, in operation since 2003, and Turk Stream, supplying Turkey and south-eastern Europe in operation since 2020. Plans for a South Stream gas pipeline running directly from Russia to Bulgaria under the Black Sea were scrapped in 2014 after the European Commission warned that it did not comply with European energy legislation. The pipelines are owned and operated by the principally Russian state-owned company Gazprom and its subsidiaries; although Gazprom is not the only Russian gas company (Europarl Europa, 2022). The article critically describes the gross level of energy imported by EU countries, including Ukraine. If the EU countries depend on Russian energy, there would not be a major war between Ukraine and Russia. The Nord Stream pipelines will supply the EU economy with reliable, green and cheap energy. For critics, they are harmful to the environment, undermine the EU's energy security and are fundamentally incompatible with EU energy law and policy. While Nord Stream's backers mostly emphasise its supposed commercial benefits, opponents see it primarily as a Kremlin-instigated project that offers little economic advantage but will weaken and divide the EU (Europarl Europa, 2022).

Russia is the largest exporter of natural gas to EU countries. EU countries depend on Russia for gas supply (41percent of EU gas imports), Russia is even more dependent on the EU, which accounts for 73 per cent of its gas exports. As EU gas consumption increases and production decreases, the EU must import more gas, including from Russia, to fill the gap. Ukraine occupies a pivotal geographical position in the transit of Russian gas. Ukrainian transit flows are by far the most important in the European gas trade and although much of Gazprom's export strategy since the breakup of the Soviet Union has been geared toward reducing (or at least not the increase) transit via Ukraine, it is probably the case that in between 2004 and 2006 more than 80% of Russian gas exports to Europe were still delivered via this country (Stern, 2006).

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Russia had sent its troops and weapons to support the rebels, according to the Ukrainian official. The Russian government agency denied this, saying the
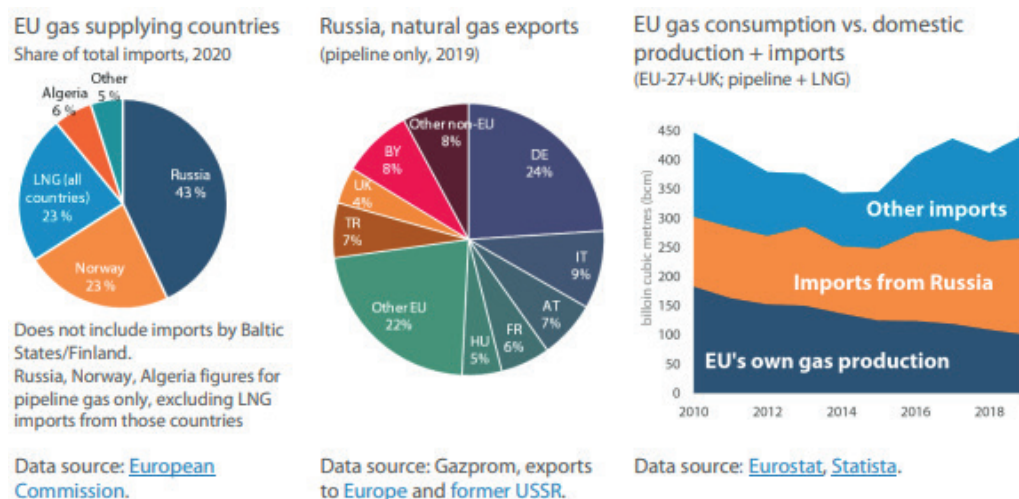

Figure 5. EU and Russian gas trade

Figure 6. Figure showing the Donbas region where separatists are fighting with the Ukrainian army

Source: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25.

Russian government was not involved in supporting the separatists and volunteers. According to Ukrainian officials, more than fourteen thousand people died in the fighting that devastated Donbas, the industrial heartland of eastern Ukraine (Aljazeera, 2022).

Discussion and Results

The political tensions that arose when Russia violated Ukraine's territorial integrity continue to the present. Thus, while justified in theory, in real terms the EU's request that Russia stop supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine had no reasonable prospect of success (Veebel & Markus, 2016). People of another national origin, who are neither Ukrainians nor Russians, are fighting in Donbas, many with neo-Nazi views. The Donbas insurgents have received the support of dozens of people from Italy, France, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and the Baltic countries. They stand with the neo-Nazis who come from all over Europe, in particular from Sweden, Italy, Germany and Finland, to help Ukraine against Russia (Laruelle, 2015, p. 15). Novorossiya is thus a unique theatre for Russian nationalism, simultaneously fuelling a red, white and brown reading of events occurring in the Donbas. Red justifies the insurgency in the name of anti-Western geopolitics, Russia's destiny to be a great territory and the Soviet memory that makes Donbas a region proud of its industrial legacy and that shows the way to a new socialist Russia. White hopes that the

current insurgency will pave the way for a renewal of political orthodoxy that will confirm Russia's status as a herald of conservative Christian values and, for some, spread nostalgia for the monarchy. El Moreno sees in Donbas a new battlefield where Aryan supremacy could defeat Europe's decline, and where young people can be trained in urban warfare to prepare for the overthrow of ruling regimes across Europe. The three interpretations compete, and partly overlap, in some of their doctrinal content. Putin has disappointed the three Novorossiya camps: they expected Donbas to integrate with Russia, following the happy fate of Crimea, while Moscow saw it only as a way to have an opinion on the future of Ukraine. They also had to accept an obvious disappointment: many eastern Ukraine regions with significant Russian-speaking populations did not go the Donbas path and remained loyal to Kyiv. Since the Minsk agreement, Novorossiya's ideological drivers have been partially shut down and have lost some of their visibility in the media. The process of normalizing Donbas as a second Transnistria under Moscow's yoke has so far been successful, even if the secessionist leaders were able to preserve some of their autonomy on the ground (Bharti, 2021).

One result of this discovery has been that the Kremlin and the West have had to take Ukrainian identity much more seriously. expected and another has been that it has gone to great lengths to promote Russian national identity through state-controlled media, but this latest effort has fallen short because Moscow's ability to promote Russian identity is limit-

ed. The same three factors have constrained previous Russian rulers: the fundamental weakness of Russian identity, the inherent tensions between the identities the state supports and those it fears, and the reactions of the growing number of non-Russian nationalities to any Russian ethnic identity (Goble, 2016).

Donetsk and Luhansk are often labelled as pro-Russian regions as a result of the founding of the People's Republics there in the spring of 2014. This research further contributes to popular opinion in Donbas before the armed conflict began, to determine whether the high concentration of ethnic Russians boosted support for separatism. This is the story of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict: the international community expected major changes over a relatively short period of time. The research result is the reason why some people supported separatism in Donbas and focuses on the relationship between ethnic identity and political attitudes. By investigating popular opinion within the Donetsk and Luhansk regions rather than between the regions of Ukraine, it is possible to hold constant two variables that often overlap with ethnicity in Ukraine: region and language, as Donbas is mainly Russian-speaking. The Russian speaking ethnic people want to assimilate with Russia.

The results presented in the article suggest a different explanation for the regional concentration of the armed conflict in Ukraine. Existing narratives explain the failure of separatist efforts in other parts of south-eastern Ukraine by pointing to the coercive power of pro-Ukrainian oligarchs or weaker economic ties with Russia. The new conflicts that begin in 2021 are the extension of the last conflicts. In the nature of this new conflict Russia has been involved much more heavily than in the last conflict (Portnov, 2015; Zhukov, 2016). Moreover, if the support behind local rebel groups results from the growing salience of regional cleavage and growing incompatibility between regional and national identities, as this article suggests, a successful large-scale insurgency could only emerge in areas with an activated regional identity redefined in exclusivist terms. Thus, despite Moscow's support for separatist militants from other regions with a Russian-speaking majority, such as Odesa or Kharkiv, they have failed to mobilise wider public support due to the weakness of the pre-existing regional identity open to exclusivist redefinition everywhere outside the Donbas (Financial Times, 2016).

Conclusion

This article aimed to contribute to the regional conflict from local, national and international causes. The Russian administration wants to gain economic power among international players. The article further contributes to the leading indicator of the current crisis in the Donbas. This has been happening in the area since 2013 when the Russian government got involved because of the local Russian-speaking population. Russia's interests in the Donbas region are supported by the group of separatists on Ukraine's eastern border. To measure the intensity of the crisis in Ukraine, it was necessary to observe each of the interacting conflicts separately: one internal, the other between Ukraine and Russia, the other with Moscow and the West. The timing of the study was determined based on the crisis of the internal conflict. To mitigate the risk and reality of violent conflict, the main threat to the democratic consolidation of the region and to offer foreign aid within the limits of new regulations on civil society activity in many countries in the region, Western strategies should aim to degrade Russia's ability to create the conditions that foster regional conflict. The Maidan narrative in Ukraine has been supported and managed by the Russian administration to take advantage, arguing that Ukraine's political transition was a strategic move by the West to make Russia more vulnerable.

This revisionist account of current events has allowed Russia to monopolise the conflict narrative throughout many neighbouring countries. The article contributed to the relationship between the EU and Russia to establish the energy needs of the West. Moreover, the West needs Russian natural gas. The EU does not openly support Ukraine in this serious crisis in the Donbas region. The Russian authorities also do not want NATO and EU expansion on their western border. The study finds evidence of a Russian policy in the Donbas region. Russia supported the separatists behind the curtain. They openly say with their European and American counterparts that we are not involved in the region. The Russian officials claimed that separatist groups belong to Ukraine in the Donbas region. The reality is different from how the separatist groups fought with the Ukrainian army without the supply of weapons. Through the Donbas conflict in the region, Russia wants to capture the Sea

of Azov which can open the roots of the Black Sea for business.

The recent conflict (2021–2022) has validated a new type of geopolitical adventurism and has blurred the borders, both territorial and imaginary, of the Russian state, with possible boomerang effects that are difficult to predict. The Russian troops stationed near the Donbas conflict zone have no international relevance. It is the wrong way of threatening a sovereign nation. The findings of this article expose the Russian government's claim that ethnic Russians in Ukraine are a natural constituency for Putin's policies, as well as one analyst's claim that Moscow had the full support of the local Russian-speaking population to build a separate state, but was unable to do so. The Russian administration continues to support and now direct participation in the Donbas region but failed to create a new Crimea. But the recent military aggression in the region is not getting international support around the world.

Theoretical approaches to explaining the onset of civil wars towards the eastern border have gradually moved away from a structural focus of previous studies and from studying the micro-foundations of armed conflict and the presence of the Russian military near the border areas (Kalyvas, 2006; Staniland, 2012; Lewis, 2017; Balcells, 2017). The article also has implications for the design of effective post-conflict public policies. While a strong regional identity played a prominent role at the start of the war, it is likely to have solidified in rebel-held areas only after years of their de facto separation from Ukraine. Meanwhile, many policy innovations of the Ukrainian government since 2014, especially in the areas of education and language, were based on ethnocentric ideas about the need to achieve greater homogeneity in the Ukrainian nation. The successful reintegration of parts of Donbas would then require adapting state policies to the often-divergent cultural needs of residents to allow greater compatibility between national and localised kinds of identity.

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