A GRADUALLY ESCALATING CONFLICT: Ukraine from the Euromaidan to the war with Russia

Tetyana Malyarenko

Introduction

In this chapter I identify and explain the critical junctures at which events in Ukraine could have taken a different turn depending on the choices (actions and reactions) of the main conflict parties. I argue that at the very beginning of the conflict escalation all sides made incorrect assumptions about one another’s intentions, resources and potential. As a result, competition between Ukrainian elite groups has transformed into full-scale war. Due to the ‘zero-sum’ strategy to which every side adheres, the confrontation has evolved from peaceful protest through violent protest and low-intensity conflict to open warfare with the employment of tanks, heavy artillery, multiple rocket systems, and airpower. This chapter demonstrates that we have witnessed the employment by Russia of a novel form of warfare that combines destabilisation with ‘creeping’ indirect occupation (hard power) and effective propaganda (soft power). In the meantime, the crisis in Ukraine has been moving along a scenario of protracted conflict. Any delay in its settlement favours the continuation of tensions.

‘Euromaidan’

In November 2013 the regime of President Viktor Yanukovych faced mass street protests in Kyiv (later tagged the Euromaidan), triggered by Yanukovych’s sudden decision to postpone signing an Association Agreement with the European Union. The motivation of the government was rather pragmatic. Due to the high dependence of the Ukrainian economy on the Russian markets, the creation of a free trade zone with the EU leading to the free access of European goods to the Ukrainian market combined with establishment of customs duties for Ukrainian exports to Russia would, it was feared, bring the Ukrainian economy to immediate collapse. Yanukovych’s government had to make a choice between two strategic, fatal and divisive decisions. On the one hand, the Association Agreement with the EU would lead to short-term euphoria among the most progressive pro-European part of civil society. However, in the midterm it carried the risk of precipitating economic decline, unemployment, poverty that, in turn would cause wide-spread dissatisfaction and protests.
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On the other hand, delay in signing or rejection of the Association agreement would lead to immediate mass protests, but could have guaranteed a medium-term stable level of economic development. As both Russia and the EU insisted, the Ukraine’s choice was defined in ‘either–or’ terms. The option of ‘both’, which for many years was the core of Ukraine’s ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy of flirting both with the West and Russia, was unavailable in November 2013.

Thus, in November 2013 Yanukovych’s decision to postpone the procedure of the signing of the Association agreement at the Vilnius summit provoked student-led protests in Kyiv’s main square Maidan. On 30 November 2013 the brutal use of violence against a relatively small number of students multiplied the number of protesters. The next day, about one million protesters demanded the resignation of Yanukovych’s government. In the period between 1 December 2013 and 22 February 2014 both sides in the conflict (the street protesters and government) increased the level of violence. Despite reconciliatory declarations, both sides were interested in upping the ante. Since the protesters’ main goal was the resignation of Yanukovych and his government, they did not believe that this could be achieved in a non-violent way. On the other side of the barricades, the hawks among Yanukovych’s clan insisted on an uncompromising policy toward the protesters and the employment of intentional (instrumental) violence, the usage of which was designed to frighten society and prevent possible future protests. As had became evident by the end of February 2014, Yanukovych’s choice was limited to two options: either to employ the armed forces against the rebels on Maidan or resign. At the same time, Ukrainian society itself was dramatically polarised and alarmed at the weakening support of Yanukovych’s government in western Ukraine and in Kyiv and strong anti-Maidan and pro-Russian attitudes in Donbas and the Crimea.

A compromise solution – an agreement on the settlement of crisis in Ukraine brokered by European Union mediators and foreign ministers Radoslaw Sikorski of Poland, Laurent Fabius of France and Frank-Walter Steinmeier of Germany was signed on 21 February 2014 by Yanukovych and the leaders of the parliamentary opposition. Its terms included constitutional reform toward the creation of a parliamentary republic to be completed by September 2014 and the holding of early presidential elections in December 2014. There would also be an investigation into violence that had occurred in Maidan, amnesty for protesters and the evacuation of public buildings seized by the protestors. However, the agreement did not come into force because of the lack of trust between the conflict parties. The street protesters refused to accept the Agreement because they did not trust Yanukovych to adhere to its terms. On 22 February 2014 Yanukovych, his family and government flew from Ukraine to Russia.

Low-intensity operation on annexation of the Crimea

When one analyses the Russian operation to annex Crimea, two questions frequently appear. The first refers to the extent to which Russian tactics were planned or improvised. The second concerns the reaction of the new Ukrainian government to the annexation – was there any possibility of preventing the annexation either by effective diplomacy or by military means? The Russian President Vladimir Putin answered the first question in the documentary film ‘The Crimea: The Journey to Motherland’, when he acknowledged that the operation had in fact been planned in advance. As for the second question there is no consensus, but it is doubtful that the Ukrainian Army could have done much to stem the Russian forces.

Opinion polls carried out in 2008 tell a very interesting story. According to data from the Razumkov Centre, the share of the population in Crimea viewing themselves as patriots of
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Ukraine was around 9 per cent, which is unsurprising given that 75 per cent consider themselves to have been subjected to forced ‘Ukrainianisation’. Polls from the same organisation carried out between 18 October 2008 and 9 November 2008 also indicated that some 79 per cent of the population favoured the union of Ukraine with Russia and Belarus (Razumkov Centre 2008a). A different poll carried out between 8 and 18 February 2014, while allowing for a significant margin of error, found 41 per cent of Crimea’s residents to be in favour of unification with Russia, compared with 33 per cent in the Donetsk and 24 per cent in the Lugansk provinces. The same poll put support for unification with Russia in the Odessa region at 24 per cent, at 6 per cent in Kyiv, with virtually no support for it in the western regions (Paniotto 2014). Data from 2011 also show that 51 per cent of Crimean residents viewed NATO as an important security threat to Ukraine, whereas the nationwide perception was much lower at 21 per cent (Razumkov Centre 2011). Interestingly the perception of Russia as a threat stood at 15 per cent of Ukrainians in general with 13 per cent of Crimean residents seeing Russia in this way. Finally, the question of whether or not the government in Kyiv (at the time run by Yanukovych) could be viewed as a threat showed a significant divergence of opinion: 33.4 per cent of Ukrainians in general saw the Yanukovych administration as a threat as opposed to 13 per cent of Crimean residents. In an alternative poll conducted by the Razumkov Centre between 17 October 2008 and 7 November 2008, 55.5 per cent of respondents stated that they associated themselves with the Russian ‘cultural tradition’, while 8.3 per cent associated themselves with the Ukrainian ‘cultural tradition’, 8.6 per cent with Crimean Tatar tradition, and 7.4 per cent with a pan-European cultural tradition (Razumkov Centre 2008b). Two interesting features emerge from this data. First, despite long-standing high support in Crimea for union with Russia, up until very recently this has not translated into a mass movement actively seeking Crimea’s separation from Ukraine. Second, while triggered by the competition between the EU and Russia over influence in and on Ukraine, anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine as a whole had not so far been a decisive political rallying cry. Rather protests in Maidan were initially primarily directed against the government of President Yanukovych and were as much about corruption and a lack of human rights and the rule of law as about his allegiance to Russia.

Three major factors accounted for stability in Crimea and in relations between Simferopol and Kyiv, and Moscow and Kyiv, respectively. The first was the status of Crimea’s autonomy in Ukraine. The second concerned the status of the Russian language in Crimea (where it is common to all residents) and Ukraine; and finally the security of Russia’s naval base in Sevastopol, which is strategically important to Russia, and seen as a ‘guarantee’ for the peninsula’s status, as well as being a major economic factor. A threat to any, let alone all, of these factors could not but seriously destabilise the situation within Crimea, Ukraine, and between Russia and Ukraine. The Euromaidan revolution in 2013/14, similar to the Orange revolution almost a decade earlier, created a strong sense of insecurity in Crimea, in particular, regarding the status of autonomy and the Russian language. This was not unfounded as the new majority in the Ukrainian parliament annulled the 2012 law ‘On foundations of the state language policy’ that gave a number of privileges to the Russian language (as co-equal to Ukrainian) on 23 February 2014 and made statements to the effect that Crimea’s status as an autonomous republic in Ukraine might be abolished. The pro-Russian Crimean political elites, in response to these events, took steps which they saw as logical for preserving the status quo and protecting the Republic’s interests. The Crimean parliament passed a resolution announcing its intention to restore the 1992 constitution, previously abolished by the Ukrainian parliament, according to which Crimea and Ukraine formed a confederation, and announced its intention to hold a referendum on this issue in Crimea (Pro skasuvannya...
Konstitucii i deyakih zakoniv AR Krym 1995). Russia, clearly fearful of being challenged by
the new Ukrainian government over its naval base and feeling humiliated by the prospect of
‘losing’ Ukraine to the EU after all, took these threats as a welcome pretext to come to the
‘rescue’ of its co-ethnics and compatriots in Crimea. Moreover, the apparent weakness of the
Ukrainian state created an opportunity for Russia to strengthen its position in the region relative
to both the West and Ukraine.

Russia’s operation to annex the Crimea started when a group of armed camouflaged troops
without military marking occupied the buildings of the Crimean parliament and Cabinet of
Ministers on 26-27 February 2014. Simultaneously, military and para-military troops set up
check-points on the Pekerop isthmus and nearby Chongar village – two roads which connect
‘continental’ Ukraine with the Crimean peninsula. On 28 February 2014 the majority of
Crimean parliamentarians voted to hold a referendum on Crimea’s future status. The ballot was
due to pose two questions. The first question proposed broad autonomy for Crimea within
Ukraine. The second question recommended returning Crimea to the constitution of 1992.

The flight of Yanukovych’s business family, the collapse of the state power and post-Maidan
euphoria caused confusion within the new administration in Kyiv. Over the next two weeks all
parties increased the rhetoric of escalation, cutting all possible routes of negotiation. On 1
March 2014 the Russian Duma voted to authorise military action against Ukraine. On 6 March
2014 the date of the referendum was brought forward to 16 March. In addition the option to stay
within Ukraine was deleted. After the referendum of 16 March, the parliament of Crimea
declared the independence of Crimea whilst simultaneously appealing for unification with
Russia. On 18 March, President Putin signed the Agreement on unification of the Crimea with
Russia.

The annexation of the Crimea intensified discussions about low-intensity operations as a
method of waging war by employing comparatively low levels of violence.

According to one definition, 

Low-intensity operation is a limited politico-military struggle to achieve political,
social, economic or psychological objectives. It is often protracted and ranges from
diplomatic, economic and psychological pressures through terrorism and insurgency.
Low-intensity conflict is generally confined to a geographic area and is often
characterized by constraints on the weaponry, tactics and level of violence.

(Molloy 2001: 16)

The annexation of the Crimea can be viewed as a classical low-intensity operation, primarily
because it was carried out without any shots being fired. Demonstrations of violence and threats
of military invasion by camouflaged Russian troops (defined in Russia as ‘polite men’ –
‘vezhlivie lyudi’) and training of the regular Russian army along the border with Ukraine was
combined with strong psychological and informational components. The annexation of Crimea
was the first in a chain of events in the framework of a Russian Spring informational campaign
targeted at several audiences. The first was the population of Russia itself, ethnic Russians and
Russian-speakers in the ‘Near Abroad’ for whom the annexation demonstrated new Russia’s
foreign policy of ‘gathering of true Russian lands’. The West was the second audience. The
annexation of Crimea manifested the re-appearance of Russia as a great power and demon-
strated its geopolitical ambitions. Finally, Moscow sought to show to the new Ukrainian ruling
elite that it could be curbed and forced to follow Russia’s course. Obviously, Crimea was, is and
will be the core of this complex and multi-layered conflict in Ukraine.
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No sustainable de-escalation and stabilisation will be possible without finding a way forward on the Crimean issue without addressing the different needs and demands of the parties involved.

Russia employed these low-intensity methods until mid-April 2014. Then Russian colonel Igor Girkin (aka Strelkov: ‘The Shooter’) and his team of mercenaries left the annexed Crimea and entered the city of Slavyansk in the Donbas. In turn, this action led to the intensification of protests in eastern Ukraine and brought about the conflict there.

The war in eastern Ukraine

Officially, the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine (or in the terminology of the Ukrainian legislation – anti-terrorist operation – ATO) began on 13 April 2014, when then acting president of Ukraine Oleksander Turchinov announced the start of a military campaign with the participation of the Ukrainian armed forces. This decision was a reaction on the seizure of Slavyansk – a city located on the north-eastern part of Donetsk administrative oblast of the Ukraine – by a group of about 30 mercenaries led by Russian colonel Igor Girkin (aka Strelkov – ‘The Shooter’). As soon as Strelkov entered Slavyansk, he dislodged both Ukrainian authorities and local pro-Russian protesters from the city. In fact, it was Strelkov who initiated real war in eastern Ukraine because he organised the defence of Slavyansk according to the rules of contemporary military art, and started to attack the Ukrainian military units from there.

Since April 2014 with regard to conflict escalation, one can identify several stages of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. As a rule, parties of the conflict changed their strategies and employed greater violence when they entered new stages of direct confrontation. In Donbas the opposing parties moved from using small arms in the early clashes of April 2014 to using tanks, heavy artillery and multiple rocket systems, aircraft and anti-aircraft defence systems when the conflict reached its peak in August 2014.

The beginning of the first stage of conflict escalation in eastern Ukraine refers to the first (spontaneous or organised by the local pro-Russian eastern Ukrainian elites) mass protests in Odessa, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson and Luhansk in the framework of an ‘anti-Maidan’ campaign. The local eastern Ukrainian elites amplified the fears of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians by blackmailing the new ruling elite in Kyiv with possible separation of eastern Ukrainian provinces in order to get more resources and power. In different parts of Ukraine local clashes and conflicts between Kyiv and local elites were settled in various ways. In some cases, powerful local oligarchs immediately supported the new government and suppressed the mass protests (Dnipropetrovsk). In other cases the local elites and Kyiv came to a local political agreement. Two eastern Ukrainian regions (Luhansk and Donetsk – the Donbas) were the exception to the rule. In both regions the flight of almost all representatives of the economic and political elites created a state of anarchy. In Donetsk, the wealthiest city of Ukraine after Kyiv, competition for the business heritage of Yanukovych’s clan involved private armies of major Ukrainian oligarchs. Yanukovych and his clan mobilised their own private armies (battalions) to protect their property in Donetsk. Moreover, representatives of former anti-riot police ‘Berkut’, local militia, and special anti-terrorist force (integrated in some way into Yanukovych’s business family) aided and stimulated the pro-Russian protesters. As soon as the anti-Maidan protests in Crimea started in late February 2014, Russian paramilitary troops (‘Cossacks’) crossed the Russia–Ukraine border and seized power in Luhansk.

Russia’s formal involvement in the first stage of conflict escalation in Donbas was evident in diplomatic efforts to pressure the new Ukrainian government to be part of an ‘inclusive, transparent and accountable constitutional process in Ukraine [with the] immediate
establishment of a broad national dialogue with outreach to all of Ukraine’s regions and political constituencies’ (Joint Geneva Statement on Ukraine 2014). The Geneva statement released by diplomats meeting to discuss the Ukrainian crisis in April 2014 contained concrete steps aimed at de-escalating tensions and restoring security for all citizens. However, very little happened in terms of its actual implementation. Updates from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine attested to the continuation of the status-quo – neither the Ukrainian government initiated the constitutional changes nor were the protesters disarmed; thus, two key points of the Geneva Agreement failed to be implemented.

The second stage of conflict escalation refers to the failure of the Geneva Agreement and the invasion by Russian mercenaries in Slavyansk. The abovementioned Russian mercenary Colonel Igor Girkin (aka Strelkov) admitted his crucial role in the escalation of the conflict:

‘I was a trigger of war in Donbas. If my troops did not cross the Russia–Ukraine border, protest in Donbas would come to its end alike it was in Kharkov or Odessa…From the very beginning we have been fighting seriously…We were the first troops, who started killing Ukrainian diversion groups’.

(BBC 2014, 20 November)

The Colonel noticed that in April–June 2014 the Ukrainian troops did not want to fight: ‘Ukrainians imitate assaults, but there is no strong wish of fighting’ (Kotich ‘Voennie svodki s Yugo-Zapadnogo Fronta’. Forum-antikvariat.ru. Posted on May 13, 2014)

He was surprised by the weakness of the Ukrainian army:

‘An examination of the wreckage left by so-called unconquerable Ukrainian army was astonishing…Before, I candidly believed that the most possible imaginable mess and slovenliness is what that the Russian army demonstrates. But now I am confident: it is possible. If the state of affairs in all Ukrainian elements is the same, I do not understand – what the fuck – why we have stopped on the Crimean isthmus?’ (Kotich ‘Voennie svodki s Yugo-Zapadnogo Fronta’. Forum-antikvariat.ru. Posted on March 13, 2014)

The occupation of Donetsk by Strelkov’s troops was the most crucial moment of conflict escalation. There is much evidence, including Strelkov’s acknowledgement that the local Donetsk elites and new ruling elites in Kyiv had come to an agreement by the end of June 2014. ‘They have prepared to capitulate in Donetsk. Life in Donetsk was luxurious, everyone was drinking coffee in the cafê, swimming, sporting. Nobody wanted fighting’ (Kotich ‘Voennie svodki s Yugo-Zapadnogo Fronta’. Forum-antikvariat.ru.).

Before Igor Strelkov entered Donetsk, all institutions of the Ukrainian state functioned in their ordinary regime, including local councils, national bank, postage, railways and tax administrations.

‘When we entered Donetsk, the Ukrainian side was completely embarrassed. They had already prescribed scenario of capitulation. When we entered Donetsk, every-thing was fine – there was major of the city and other authorities subordinated to Kyiv. We were defending Donetsk for almost 40 days before the Russian vacationers came’, – Colonel says. (Kotich ‘Voennie svodki s Yugo-Zapadnogo Fronta’. Forum-antikvariat.ru. Posted on 6 July 2014)
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Finally, the third stage started with Russia’s invasion by ‘vacationers’ in mid-August 2014. The Russian vacationers crossed the Russia–Ukraine border and defeated the Ukrainian forces in several pockets, and sought to compel Kyiv to negotiate with representatives of Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic in Minsk.

Russia’s strategy in a two-period war game in Ukraine

In assessing formal negotiation of the parties to conflict, peace agreement and ceasefire as the main criteria for identification of the different ‘periods of war’ and ‘periods of peace’ in Donbas, three stages of conflict are discernible, interrupted by meetings of the conflict sides, first, in Geneva on 17 April 2014 and second, in Minsk on 5 September 2014. However, if we use the different concepts of waging war on which the Russian strategy was built as an identification criterion, we can identify the existence of two periods of war. The first period is that of the low-intensity conflict Russia waged between 22 February 2014 and mid-August 2014. The second started in mid-August with the full-scale invasion by ‘vacationers’ equipped with tanks and heavy artillery. This period started with the massive defeat experienced by the Ukrainian army at Ilovaysk (see below) and came to its (temporary) end with the Ukrainian withdrawal from Debaltsevo.

Russia and hybrid warfare

The concept of ‘hybrid’ war re-appeared on the academic and policy agendas after Russia’s annexation of the Crimea. According to one definition, hybrid warfare is:

a conflict involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars (guerrillas, insurgents, and terrorists) which could include both state and non-state actors, aimed at achieving a common political purpose. Irregular forces need not be centrally directed, although in many cases they form part of a coherent strategy used to oppose an invader or occupation force. Hybrid warfare also plays out at all levels of war, from the tactical, to the operational, to the strategic.

(Mansoor 2013: 3)

In hybrid wars, actors use a variety of tactics, techniques and procedures to fit their goals and help to conclude a conflict successfully. In hybrid warfare, the distinction between large, regular wars and small, irregular wars becomes blurred. Most academic publications on Russia’s role in the Ukrainian conflict are lacking in clarity regarding Russia’s strategy, goals and methods. Two explanations are very popular. According to the first, Russia does not have any strategy at all (only tactics). The second antithetical explanation, considers Russia’s grand strategy as a combination of neo-Sun Tzu arts of waging war aimed at returning Russia to its previous position as a global superpower. In this chapter I argue that first, Russia does have a strategy and second, it is fighting not for global leadership, but for its Near Abroad. As a regionally focused power Russia is interested in a stable and friendly neighbourhood. Stability can be achieved either by ‘soft’ or ‘hard’ power or a combination of both. Like other post-Soviet countries, Ukraine is an important neighbour for Russia, and thus, Russia is interested in a predictable, secure and managed Ukraine. This goal can be supplemented through the export of a (friendly) political regime. Ukraine is a convenient subject for the export of a political regime because of a protracted and so far inconclusive transition process characterised by three mutually reinforcing dynamics: (a) systemic social and political conflicts; (b) economic
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stagnation and crisis; (c) incomplete state-building. In Ukraine, Russia’s goal is to influence its
domestic and foreign policy by establishing privileged relations with the Ukrainian elites either
by supporting the current elites or appointing replacements. The aim of Russia’s involvement in
the current Ukrainian crisis is traditional – the export of a political regime via loyal political
elites who can guarantee a predictable Ukraine. In Ukraine Russia uses a set of different tools in
order to destabilise the socio-economic and political situation within the country in order to
weaken the current pro-Western government and exchange the current elite for a more pro-
Russian counterpart.

As with all major wars in Russia’s history, the war in Ukraine is a means through which
Russia seeks confirmation and consolidation of its geopolitical identity. Russian geopolitical
identity is built on ideas of neo-Eurasianism. Neo-Eurasianism is a continuation of
Slavophilism, the core of which is Orthodox Christianity, a particular system of values and
traditions of the Russian people revitalised in 2014 as the concept of the Russian World and its
practical implication – the Russian Spring. The intention to ‘re-unite’ the Russian nation and to
defend Russians living abroad, as well as to protect the core values and interests of Russia are
the key factors that explain the rationale for the annexation of the Crimea and war in Donbas.
Secondly, eastern European states and their territory (named in the Russian geopolitical tradition
as ‘geopolitical channels’) are significant with regards to the final design and scale of the
Russian geopolitical footprint against the background of the blurred and fluid border of the
Russian World. Third, one can find similarities in major wars which Russia has waged against
neighbouring civilisations. Russia is either waging war in the geopolitical channels, or Russia is
waging war on its core territory.

One of the innovative features of Russia’s hybrid war in Donbas is the attempt to employ net-
work structure for management of the processes of conflict escalation/de-escalation. Obviously,
in comparison with traditional bureaucracies, a network structure is more adaptive, it stimulates
innovation and creativity, and the line of command is shorter. There are four major
organisations which coordinate Russia’s policy toward its Near Abroad: (1) The Office of the
Russian President Vladimir Putin; (2) the Ministry of Defence; (3) the Federal Security Service;
(4) and various organisations of civil society under the umbrella of the government, for
example, the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian patriotic and veterans associations and clubs,
and the mass-media.

Each organisation acts almost independently in the framework of a ‘corridor’ allowed by the
Kremlin, under its own strategy and budget. For an illustration of the style of leadership and
decision making in the Kremlin see Gleb Pavlovsky (2014), a leading and very close advisor to
Vladimir Putin. He speaks of a style of ‘non-prohibition’ leadership which causes an overlap in
activities between the different bodies. Yet at the same time it is also the creation of a space for
creativity. Putin’s ‘non-prohibition’ involves many actors; it liberates their energy in order to
create room for manoeuvre – a big advantage for every policy-maker. Vladimir Putin constructs
the space for creativity independently, but formally, he is distant from their actions. What one
can view as chaos and crudity is Putin’s strategic and organisational innovation: he is creating
new opportunities to which he is simultaneously connected and not connected, but only Putin
can control and manage these opportunities. This style also applies to the above-mentioned
organisations, participating in the conflict in Ukraine. There is real market competition between
them. In the end, Putin chooses between several alternative competitive products (for example,
politico-military scenarios) and maintains influence on his disconnected subordinates. For
Russia’s opponents, it is extremely difficult to figure out and therefore oppose Russia’s strategy
or rather a set of political, military, economic and informational strategies, realised by several
actors on behalf of Russia at different levels (national, regional and global).
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However, weak coordination and a liberal style of governance can backfire on the strategist when actions of excessively zealous subordinates change the course of war completely. This was the case in May–June 2014. Strelkov’s successful campaign in Slavyansk resulted in dramatic conflict escalation in all parts of eastern Ukraine. Strelkov’s freedom in the design and implementation of his tactics brought about an unexpected shift from low-intensity conflict to full-fledged war. First, as it is evident (and Strelkov himself has accepted it), he made an initial wrong assumption about the Kremlin’s intentions regarding Donetsk and Luhansk. He assumed that Russia’s intention was annexation of these territories and that his task was to maintain his power over them until the Russian army invaded:

Novorossia is a part of Russian World. The territory from Donbas to Odessa is a part of Russia. It is not acceptable to talk about Novorossia as about separate from Russia entity…Donetsk and Luhansk cannot stand against the Ukrainian army alone…Initially, we assumed ‘the Crimean scenario’. Nobody wanted fighting for Donetsk and Luhansk republics. We thought – the Russian administration would come…It would be one more republic in the Russian Federation. When it became clear that Russia would not take us, it was a shock for us. (Kotich ‘Voennie svodki s Yugo-Zapadnogo Fronta’. Forum-antikvariat.ru. Posted on 7 May 2014)

Having based his activity on the assumption that Russia would intervene, Strelkov asked for more weapons and soldiers. On 13 May 2014 he complained: ‘We don’t have sufficient quantity of weapons for the conduct of long operations. The ratio between Ukrainian troops and rebels is 10 to 1. For weapons, the ratio is 50 to 1. We have at our disposal trophy armours and one cannon’ (Kotich ‘Voennie svodki s Yugo-Zapadnogo Fronta’. Forum-antikvariat.ru. Posted in 13 May 2014).

The Slavyansk campaign could have lasted a long time. However, Strelkov realised his importance as a decision-maker and decided to hasten the arrival of the Russian Empire in Donetsk. His ambitions were perfectly suited to the ‘non-prohibition’ mandate and Putin’s leadership style: ‘Now we are waging war for entire Ukraine. Casualties among civilians and pro-Russian soldiers will help us in the future flight for millions of citizens of Ukraine’ (Kotich ‘Voennie svodki s Yugo-Zapadnogo Fronta’. Forum-antikvariat.ru. Posted on 22 June 2014).

By June 2014 Strelkov was aware of growing rapprochement between the Donetsk elites and Kyiv. So, in order to prevent the return of Donetsk to Ukrainian rule he decided (unexpectedly for the Kremlin) to occupy the city, which was then under the dual control of the Ukrainian authorities and local paramilitary troops and refused to swear to new central government. Having occupied Donetsk, Strelkov intensified the conflict and provoked the full-scale invasion of ‘vacationers’ in mid-August 2014.

‘The Russian World’ and ‘the Russian Spring’

‘The Russian World’ is a logical continuation of Eurasianism. The traditional ideology of Eurasianism was born in the 1920s among the Russian emigration in contradistinction to the ideology of Bolshevism. However, in comparison to the ideals and values of Bolshevism, Eurasianism seemed boring, out-of-date and unattractive. Yet, in the 2000s ‘the Russian World’ was re-born as a political project aimed at the creation of an ‘alternative reality’ for Russians and Russian-speakers in the ‘Near Abroad’. As a project aimed at persuasion and
manipulation more than at creation of new values, the contemporary concept of ‘the Russian World’ has been designed by leading Russian philosophers based on the key principles of post-modernism, such as the denial of universal constructions and rationality, acceptance of the possibility to construct reality, disproval of all authorities, hybridisation, madness, absurdism, illusion, ruse, black humour and sexuality. ‘The Russian World’ synthesises images, narratives, historical memories about the victories and deprivations of Russian people. ‘The Russian World’ combines in an eclectic manner nostalgia for the Soviet past, the values of Orthodox Christianity, contemporary technologies and patriarchal traditions. Since carnival and theatricality are the key characteristics of any post-modernist project, the Russian World and Russian Spring contain plenty of carnival elements in socio-political and military areas of strategy. Among examples of the carnival elements are: the employment of professional actors for participation in the street protests, thorough construction of major media images of Novorossia’s heroes, military training along the Ukraine-Russia borders, Russian military aircraft flying near NATO countries, and escalating/de-escalating statements made by Russian politicians. A leading author of the contemporary concept P. Schedrovitsky (2000), proposed the following definition of the Russian World: ‘The Russian World is a network structure of large and small societies who think in the Russian language’.

This wide definition of the Russian World (the main measure of which is creation and maintenance of the network structures) perfectly fits Putin’s style of ‘non-prohibition’ and space for permanent competing creativities he supports. Putin is not claiming to have con-structed a new ideology. He has exchanged his right of construction for the privilege of keeping control over mainstreaming messages, which the Kremlin brings to the public. Everyone who is looking in the same direction as him enjoys freedom of speech. As a result, the Russian World appears as a ‘bricolage’.

As long as the implementation of ‘the Russian World’ has domestic and foreign policy implications, the bricolage messages of the Russian World have both internal and external customers. In Russian foreign policy, ‘the Russian World’ appeared in Putin’s Munich speech of 2007 as: (1) Russia’s refusal to accept a unipolar world; (2) grievance and dis-satisfaction with NATO enlargement; (3) the right of Russia to act independently and according to its national interests (Putin 2007).

Russia did not consider the processes of EU and NATO enlargement as a serious threat to its security while the enlargement involved countries of Eastern Europe (‘geopolitical channels’) which Russia has never considered part of its core territory – contrary to the countries of the so-called ‘Near Abroad’. Russian foreign policy in the ‘Near Abroad’ (‘The Russian Spring’) includes the protection of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers, embarking upon ‘preventive measures’ in the territory of foreign states and guaranteeing the right of Russians abroad to seek unification with the Motherland. The rapid change in the political regime in Kyiv in January–February 2014 supplemented by anti-Russian and anti-Putin rhetoric was (taken as) a signal of the West’s invasion of the Russian World’s core territory (at least as Russia understands it) and required immediate reaction. It is also worth remembering that establishing ‘de-facto’ states, for example, in Georgia and Moldova, was always a means to an end – to dictate the terms of ‘re-unification’ and to gain permanent control over some former Soviet republics’ foreign policy choices.

**Russian tactics during the Donbas spring–summer 2014 campaign**

The tactics of the spring–summer campaign of Russia’s hybrid war in Ukraine had three main politico-military scenarios.
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1 The optimistic scenario assumed that the annexation of the Crimea and support of the pro-Russian protesters in eight administrative (primarily eastern) oblasts of Ukraine by money, weapons and mercenaries would counter-balance radical nationalistic pro-Ukrainian attitudes in Kyiv and Western Ukraine and possibly, through constitutional changes, would bring to power a Ukrainian elite, loyal to Russia, which, in turn would recognise the annexation of Crimea or any other compromise solution.

2 The realistic scenario – mass protests and popular dissatisfaction in eastern Ukraine combined together with the threat of Russian invasion would convince Kyiv to compromise and would draw away the attention of Kyiv and the West from the annexation of the Crimean. The Crimean question would be outside of any possible peace negotiations on the enduring settlement.

3 The pessimistic scenario – mass protests and civil unrest would lead to the creation of a de-facto state on the territory of eight administrative oblasts of south-eastern Ukraine (optimistic variant) or on the territory of Donetsk and Luhansk administrative oblasts (pessimistic variant). The new de-facto state ‘Novorossia’ created on the territory of the economically developed industrial part of Ukraine would be able to provide economic growth due to integration with the Eurasian Customs Union. At the same time, suffering the double impact of broken economic ties with Russia and the loss of the industrially developed parts of the country, the core ‘right-bank’ agricultural Ukraine would be forced to come to a compromise with Russia.

As is now evident, each of these scenarios was built on the following assumptions:

1 The war would not last for a long time (both Russia and Ukraine planned to win the war before September 2014).

2 The Ukrainian government would compromise/capitulate in the short-term period regarding the status of Crimea and federalisation of Ukraine.

3 There is significant pro-Russian segment within Ukrainian society (ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians) which would support the protesters and rebellion in the eastern part of Ukraine. The eastern Ukrainian elites would support the rebellion.

4 Sanctions from the West, including economic ones, would be insignificant.

The optimistic scenario was taken as the base for actions. Having financed the protests in south-eastern Ukraine (first of all, in Kharkiv and Odessa) in March 2014, the option of armed revolt or/and armed invasion was not considered seriously at that time. By the end of June 2014, the pro-Russian rebels were only equipped with small arms and a few howitzers. At the same time, Russia indirectly threatened Ukraine with possible military invasion and had been carrying out military exercises along the Ukrainian border. The key message of Russia’s strategy is: ‘We need ALL pro-Russian Ukraine. That is why we are fighting not for separate territories, but for the whole of Ukraine in Russia’s orbit’.6

Russian tactics in the summer–autumn campaign of 2014

When it became evident that the main assumptions of Russia’s strategy regarding conflict dynamics, attitudes of the population and the elites in eastern Ukraine were incorrect, Russia changed its strategy toward more violent ways of exercising pressure. As Putin has subsequently confirmed, in mid-August 2014 Russia invaded with troops – who officially were on vacation from their obligations in the Russian army (the so-called ‘vacationers’). However, the
employment of regular troops and in particular, special forces (‘spetsnaz’) was limited to special operations and very decisive military engagements, for example, in Ilovaysk in August 2014 and the Debaltsevo pockets and in the seizure of the Donetsk airport in January 2015.

Since mid-August 2014, the armies of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) have been provided with weapons and supplies in convoys from Russia. The artillery of DPR and LPR shell the positions of the Ukrainian army, which provokes the Ukrainians into engaging in local clashes. As a result, there is a gradual ‘creeping’ occupation of the Ukrainian territories. Unfortunately, the Minsk II agreement of February 2015, which sought to shore up the ceasefire and restart dialogue between warring factions, did not change Russia’s intentions. Low-intensity battles occur along the front line. As a result of this fighting, DPR and LPR are gaining territory.

The Ilovaysk ‘pocket’

The battle for Ilovaysk (important for its railway hub located 45 km south-east from Donetsk) is regarded as the most bloody battle in the Russia–Ukraine war in Donbas. About 8,000 Ukrainian troops were surrounded in a ‘pocket’ near Ilovaysk in August 2014. According to official data from the Ukrainian government, 360 Ukrainian troops were killed (Report of Parliamentary Investigative Commission on Ilovaysk 2014). However, informal estimates by Ukrainian commanders, volunteers and pro-Russian rebels are different from official data. According to them, as many as 3,000 Ukrainian soldiers may have been killed in the pocket.8

At the beginning of August 2014 the Ukrainian military sought to cut Donetsk both from Luhansk and from Russia on two strong fronts. The first thrust of the Ukrainian army would come from north-east near Debaltsevo. The second thrust would come from south-east near Ilovaysk. If successful, Donetsk would be surrounded. Major railway communication lines and highways for supply of weapons, money and mercenaries from Russia would have been cut.

As became evident from the beginning of the military campaign for Ilovaysk, both the Ukrainian joint forces and the Russian Orthodox Army (pro-Russian troops subordinated to Donetsk People’s Republic) failed to organise an all-round line of defence of their positions. The main armoured forces of the Ukrainian armed forces were located in the centre of the Ukrainian positions, whereas poorly equipped and weakly trained paramilitary battalions defended the flanks.

In August 2014, the Russian Orthodox Army attacked the flanks of the Ukrainian forces from the north (from Donetsk) and from the Russia–Ukraine border (Uspenka border control point), thus encircling Ukrainian armoured brigades. The pro-Russian forces cut the communications of the Ukrainian army and defeated its rear area forces. At the same time, Russian ‘vacationers’ passed throughout the Azov sea coast and stopped near Mariupol on the south of the front line and Volnovakha on the west of the front line. There was real risk of occupation of Mariupol that would open a ‘road’ from Russian Rostov-on-Don to the annexed Crimea. All relief efforts of the Ukrainian army failed. The 92nd Ukrainian armoured brigade (about 2,000 troops) was confronted and pushed back pounded by Russian ‘vacationers’ on its way to Ilovaysk.

Nevertheless, the main tragedy lay ahead. On 29 August 2014, Putin appealed to the Russian Orthodox Army via Russian mass-media to release the Ukrainian troops from the encirclement and indeed an agreement was reached, according to which the Ukrainian armoured brigades would leave the pocket unarmed. However, the surrounded Ukrainian forces broke the agreement. They attempted to break free from the encirclement taking with
them with all their military equipment, including tanks and artillery. This provoked counteraction by the separatists. The major column of the Ukrainian army was halted. About 1,000 troops were killed and about 700 were taken prisoner.

According to President Poroshenko’s report, the Ukrainian army lost its most battle-hardened brigades and about 30 per cent of all tanks, 74 per cent of all troop carriers, 93 per cent of all howitzers, 60 per cent of all self-propelled artillery vehicles and 67 per cent of multiple rocket systems in the battle for Ilovaysk (Report of Parliamentary Investigative Commission on Ilovaysk 2014). The view that the Russian regular army attacked the Ukrainian positions is widespread. In any case, the Ilovaysk tragedy caused a major re-think in Kyiv and helped to bring about the first Minsk negotiations. It was significant tactical engagement that strengthened Russia’s position at the negotiating table.

Novorossia or occupation?

By the start of the armed conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk, these administrative oblasts of Ukraine were the most densely populated territories of Ukraine, with 4.825 million living in the Donetsk oblast and 2.5 million living in the Luhansk oblast. Donetsk city had a population of a million and 440,000 resided in Luhansk city (All-Ukrainian Census 2001). According to various estimates of the local authorities and international organisations, approximately 3.3 to 3.5 million still live in territory on which the Ukrainian State de-facto does not exercise its power. Ukraine’s Ministry of Social Policy puts the number of registered internally displaced persons countrywide at 980,000. In addition since February 2014, some 600,000 Ukrainians have sought asylum or other forms of legal sojourn in neighbouring countries, particularly the Russian Federation, but also in Belarus and Moldova. This dramatic flight of the people of Donetsk and Luhansk tends itself to question the character and support of Novorossia.9

According to the census results of 2001 the ethnic structure in the Donetsk oblast was as follows: Ukrainians constituted about 56 per cent and Russians 38.2 per cent. Ukrainians formed 58 per cent of Luhansk oblast’s population with Russians making up 39 per cent. The overwhelming majority of the population of both oblasts is Russian-speaking (All-Ukrainian Census 2001). This unique ethnic structure and common history led to the creation of a special regional (so-called ‘Donetsk’) identity in Donetsk whereas residents of Luhansk identified themselves either as ethnic Russians or as Russian-speaking Ukrainians.

Under the circumstances outlined earlier it is clear why a majority of the population in Donetsk and Luhansk considered Euromaidan as a threat to their safety and well-being (according to opinion polls, in April 2014, 70.5 per cent of respondent of Donbas assessed Euromaidan as a coup d’état). In February 2014, 25.8 per cent of the respondents of eastern Ukraine (Kharkov, Donetsk and Luhansk) claimed it would vote for unification of Ukraine with Russia (Takoy Razniy Yugo-vostok 2015).

The creation of new ‘states’

The brand ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ first came into the political life of Ukraine during the ‘The Orange Revolution’ of 2004/5. The ‘Donetsk Republic’ was a typical ‘pocket’ party or, in contemporary political lexicon, a ‘technological project’ funded and managed by the Party of the Regions. The ‘Donetsk Republic’ performed two tasks: (1) it brought to Party of the Regions potential leftist voters, taking them away from the Communist Party of Ukraine; (2) it blackmailed Kyiv and the ‘Orange’ government by the threat of separatism in eastern Ukraine. In Yanukovych’s time, the ‘Donetsk Republic’ did not appear in the
political arena. It was simply unnecessary. As the president of Ukraine, Yanukovych concentrated on keeping Ukraine united through the reconciliation of western and eastern parts of the country, which traditionally support diametrically opposed directions of foreign policy. Under such conditions, support for the separatist ‘Donetsk Republic’ had little appeal to the ruling elite.

The re-appearance of the ‘Donetsk Republic’ issue occurred under similar circumstances to those of November 2004. In 2014, Yanukovych faced losing his power and influence on Ukraine’s politics. The first ‘Donetsk Republic’ was rather a farce. The second ‘Donetsk Republic’ is more of a tragedy. There is a fatal set of inter-related factors that together brought this to a head in 2014. These include the flight of Yanukovych and his business family, external funding and organisation of the mass protests in Donbas, the entrance of Igor Strelkov and other Russian mercenaries, and finally, the open Russian invasion by the ‘vacationers’.

A ‘white elephant’

The technique of creation and support of de-facto states in the ‘Near Abroad’ is a well-known and well-developed strategy used by Russia as a means of creating internal instability and tensions through which Russia can impact the foreign policy of its post-Soviet neighbours. Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are examples. In this chapter I argue that the establishment of the Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic was a complex combination of unplanned spontaneous actions by some actors (for example, Igor Strelkov), Russia’s tactical steps, and mistakes by Moscow, Kyiv and local Ukrainian elites. All taken together they led to the birth of a ‘white elephant’ which both Russia and Ukraine are unable to rid themselves of and which neither can they keep or integrate. Secondly, the processes within DPR and LPR and specific functions that local ‘republican’ elites deliver for their population allow us to argue that we are witnessing a process of military occupation as opposed to any attempt at state building.

The DPR declared its independence on 7 April 2014, with the LPR following suite on 12 May 2014 after simultaneous ‘referendums’ had taken place in both ‘republics’. On 24 May the leadership of both ‘republics’ signed a confederation agreement on establishment of the state of ‘Novorossia’. Nevertheless, the political regimes of DPR and LPR were different. After Yanukovych’s flight, power in Donetsk was captured by the battalions (private armies) of local oligarchs, including former representatives of anti-riot police ‘Berkut’, police and special military troops, previously subordinated to Yanukovych’s government. The ruling elite in Donetsk was a symbiosis of public officials still subordinated to Kyiv and organised criminal groups. At the same time, Russian paramilitary troops (Cossacks) entered Luhansk immediately after the flight of the local elite.

When Igor Strelkov entered Donetsk on 5 July 2014, he established a military dictatorship (so-called ‘Orthodox sharia’), including the death penalty for looting, curfews, drum-head court martials, and severe thorough control of the population and vehicles in the city including an extensive network of check-points. In Luhansk, the disintegration of power and anarchy brought quasi-feudal rule. Since May 2014 local ‘republican’ authorities have failed to build state institutions and public governance in the areas of economy and social service as well as the financial and banking systems. The Donetsk railway and other strategic infrastructure on the occupied territories are managed by Kyiv. Most business on the territory of self-proclaimed states functions according to Ukrainian legislation and pays taxes to the Ukrainian budget. Local civil society delivers the most basic public functions. As far as both
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Kyiv and Moscow refuse to fund the social infrastructure and pay social benefits for the residents of the uncontrolled territory of Donbas, socially vulnerable groups of the population are left to survive on their own.

All the above brings us to the conclusion that the first and foremost function of both ‘republics’ is to wage war against Ukraine formally, on their own behalf, but in fact, pursuing Russia’s interests.

The failure of state-building initiatives in the Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic together with Russia’s efforts to ban some local initiatives on state-building send a signal that we are dealing with leverage that is different to that previously employed by Russia. Russian tactics are not concerned with the creation of de-facto states, but about managed destabilisation through a combination of ‘creeping’ occupation with other methods, first of all, in the area of information, mass-media and propaganda.

At the same time, Kyiv also demonstrates a lack of clarity in legally defining the armed conflict in Donbas. Ukrainian legislation on this subject is rather confusing. At present, officials do not refer to Russia as a military occupier. On 14 April 2014 the acting president of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchinov signed a Decree authorising the commencement of anti-terror operations (ATO) in eastern Ukraine (which is still in force). According to Ukrainian law the ATO are carried out by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Security Service of Ukraine. The armed forces cannot be involved. After the conflict escalated in mid-August 2014 with the failure of the first Minsk agreement, the president of Ukraine Poroshenko isolated the territories defined as ‘temporarily outside of the Ukrainian state’s control’ from other parts of Ukraine and banned any economic relation with them. Later on, the Ukrainian parliament appealed to the UN, European Parliament, Council of Europe, NATO, OSCE and all national parliaments demanding that they label Russia as state that supports terrorism and terrorist organisations in Ukraine.

Finally, on 17 March 2015, it issued a resolution on the ‘temporarily occupied territories’. This resolution, nevertheless, does not identify any state as a military occupier and does not clarify relations between Kyiv and the ‘occupied territories’. One of the main reason for this uncertainty lies in the problems of a legal definition of military occupation, in particular, when the occupying state has not announced or confirmed its military occupation directly. The international character of occupation and direct rule of the occupying country via military or civilian administrations are understood by all experts. Legal definitions of territories being occupied are problematic, for example, if the occupying state exercises its authority indirectly via proxies. It is even more difficult if the territory is captured by a non-state actor such as paramilitary troops or mercenaries.

There are several ways in which Russian mercenaries arrived in Donbas: patriotic organisations in Russia, associations of veterans of the militia, and Afghan and Chechen wars. The mercenaries are trained in special camps on the territory of Rostov-on-Don region of Russia or Donetsk oblast of Ukraine. As a rule, ‘elitist’ troops – veterans of the Russian special forces (‘spetsnaz’) – are sent to Donetsk whereas other mercenaries are sent to Luhansk. One of the Russian mercenaries describes his way to Donbas:

There is high demand for qualified soldiers – gun layers, spotters, signalers. Others are sent to shooting subunits. There are consistent shaping of units and military trainings. The border between Russia and Ukraine looks like a sieve. You may go any direction – nobody asks. Everything is clear. The columns with the military equipment are crossing the border during all the day without any camouflage.

(Rosbalt 2015).
Igor Strelkov writes about the motivation and ideology of the Russian ‘irregulars’: ‘The irregular army gathers individuals of different opinions, united by common Russian language and hatred against Ukraine. It is injurious for our common deal to create any common ideology for them’ (Kotich ‘Voennie svodki s Yugo-Zapadnogo Fronta’. Forum-antikvariát. ru. Posted on 1 June 2014).

Igor Strelkov’s statement brings us to the question about the key idea of the statehood for Novorossia and the main purpose of its creation. In fact, one can find three alternative projects of the Russian state in the narratives which leaders of Novorossia tell us. The first ‘Russian state’ is Ukraine. For many Russians and Vladimir Putin, Ukrainians are ethnically Russian people who have lost their Russian identity. As they believe, Ukraine is largely populated by Russian people, and as such the rationale for Ukraine’s existence as a state has always been questioned by the majority of ethnic Russians. The second Russian State is the Russian Federation, the current political regime which is opposed by the majority of the Russian mercenaries in Donbas. Finally, Novorossia as a newly established ‘true Russian’ State could be a driving force for changes in both Russia and Ukraine and has a power to bring them to unification.

As confirmation of the role for Novorossia, Aleksandr Dugin in his speech to Donetsk said:

Novorossia means New Russia. Your mission is not only to save yourselves. Your mission is to renovate Russia, which is currently a mix of compromises between anti-Russian and Russian World. The Russian State is not true Russia now. It is not Russia who will save you. You – Novorossia – will save Russia.

(Dugin 2014)

The strategy of Ukraine in the ATO and the war against Russia

During the period March 2014 and May 2014 the Ukrainian military command lacked a comprehensive strategy of how to oppose the separatist movements and/or to prevent Russia from supporting pro-Russian protests in eastern Ukraine. Russia’s rapid annexation of Crimea yielded its fruits: Kyiv was completely shocked and demoralised. The newly appointed Ukrainian government preferred to avoid open military confrontation with Russia, instead appealing to international organisations and countries, which signed the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances in 1994, namely the United States of America and the United Kingdom, with a claim to influence Russia’s return to the rules of international law and facilitate Russia’s further respect of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Later, Kyiv did accept the status quo. It evacuated a few Ukrainian battalions from the annexed Crimea to other parts of Ukraine. Second, the law of Ukraine ‘On rights and freedoms of citizens and legal regime on temporary occupied territories of Ukraine’ was adopted on 15 April 2014. According to this law, the Ukrainian government established an economic blockade of the annexed Crimea. It also withdrew all public institutions and declared all economic activity as being illegal (Zakon Ukraini Pro zabezpechennya prav I svobod gromadyan 2015).

The context of post-Euromaidan atmosphere is important for understanding the frequently non-systemic, illogical and incomprehensive nature of Kyiv’s strategic decisions, in particular during the first months of war until the invasion by Russian ‘vacationers’ in mid-August 2014. Post-Euromaidan euphoria and wide-spread expectations for an easy and quick victory in Donbas created negative public attitude to any possible compromise with the rebels and/or Russia. Any compromise would have been seen as a national reproach or treason.

The Euromaidan revolution destroyed institutions of the repressive state. The Ukrainian society has considered this distraction as an action in favour of public interest and utility. That
is why the new ruling democratic elite did worry about the legal quality of their politico-military decisions. Revolutionary expediency won over the rule of law. On the other hand, bureaucratic organisations of the Ministry of Defence and Military Headquarters requested the appropriate development of the legal framework for any operation/action, creating the way for obstacles for the conduct of war. Paramilitary troops, acting on the side of the Ukrainian government did not have the official status of combatants. Confrontation between Headquarter and paramilitary battalions and the absence of the line of command led to a lack of centralised command, expertise, and, therefore, ultimately defeat.

During May–June 2014, when Strelkov’s activity in Slavyansk required a reaction, Kyiv increased the mobilisation of paramilitary troops (still on a voluntary base). In May 2014, the Ukrainian forces acting together with local militia succeeded in recapturing Mariupol – the key industrial and seaport south of Donbas. At the same time, the Ukrainian army started re-organising its sub-units and employed the artillery and aircraft for attacks on the occupied cities in Donbas on a regular basis. As soon as the Ukrainian forces started to use aircraft the rebels received contemporary air-to-air defence systems. By mid-July 2014, the losses of the Ukrainian air forces had become significant. Since the MH17 crash near Donetsk in July 17 2014 the Ukrainian command had no aircraft operating in the conflict zone.

The Russian ‘vacationers’ entered Ukraine in mid-August 2014. By way of reaction, Kyiv shifted gear. The Ukraine’s current politico-military strategy is built on realistic assumptions about the impossibility of winning a war against regular Russian troops, but also it excludes any compromise on the status of occupied territories and federalisation of Ukraine (which was the core of the Russia’s claims). Kyiv intends to separate war-affected territories from the territories controlled by the Ukrainian state through economic and transport blockades and also by building fortifications along the Russia–Ukraine border and administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk. If the main message of Russia’s strategy is: ‘We need ALL pro-Russian Ukraine’\(^9\), the main message of Ukraine’s strategy is: ‘Leave us alone’. Kyiv’s main task is the minimisation of Russia’s influence on all unoccupied parts of Ukraine.

Obviously, this combination of strategies brings us to a ‘zero-sum’ game in which neither conflict side wants to compromise. Under such conditions, the conflict will likely become protracted where the side with higher economic potential has the greater chance of winning.

All along, the foundations of Ukraine’s strategy have rested upon three assumptions:

1. Russia would not intervene in conflict in eastern Ukraine with its regular armed forces. Kyiv would deal with pro-Russian separatists only.
2. The war, defined in terms of the Ukrainian legislation as an ‘anti-terrorist operation’ would not last for a long time; losses would be insignificant.
3. NATO or the USA would intervene and protect Ukraine from Russia’s aggression. The threat of NATO involvement would keep Russia from a full-scale invasion.

Obviously, the Ukraine’s military strategy (or lack of it) is a logical continuation of its political and socio-economic problems: Ukraine has not defined a new format of relations with Russia, taking into account both the war in eastern Ukraine and high dependence of the economy on Russian natural gas and Russian markets. Ukraine’s informal consent to ceding territories to Russia is a consequence of such indecisiveness. Moreover, there is a lack of a common and comprehensive vision of the future Ukrainian statehood and national idea. Important reforms in the economy and public administration have not started yet. The country lacks any clear perspective for development. Institutional disintegration, corruption and extremism continue to corrode society.
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Ceasefire and peace agreements

During the process of conflict escalation there were three major meetings of the warring parties together with international mediators aimed at conflict settlement. As a result of the Geneva meeting on de-escalation of the situation in Ukraine between the European Union, the USA, Ukraine and Russia on 16 April 2014 the four parties issued a joint statement on concrete steps which all conflict sides should undertake in order to de-escalate tensions and restore security for Ukraine’s citizens. ‘All illegal armed groups must be disarmed. All illegally seized buildings must be returned to legitimate owners…Amnesty will be granted to protestors…The announced constitutional process will be inclusive, transparent and accountable’ (Joint Geneva Statement on Ukraine 2014).

Neither Russia nor Ukraine intended to compromise. Ukraine’s position was that Russia should withdraw mercenaries and stop its support for pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. At the same time, Ukraine failed to implement its part of the Geneva agreement – to change the constitution toward granting autonomy for south-eastern Ukraine. For its part, Russia was waiting for the constitutional reform in Ukraine. Until the reform Kremlin would not decrease the escalation.

Given that peaceful conflict settlement was dead in the water, the warring parties continued a path of escalation for almost four months until Russian ‘vacationers’ invaded Ukraine. Then, the Minsk agreement drawn up on 5 September 2014 by the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine (Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE) ensured an immediate bilateral ceasefire, the decentralisation of power, permanent monitoring of the Russia–Ukraine border, withdrawal of illegal armed groups and military equipment as well as mercenaries from Ukraine (Protocol on Results of Consultations of the Trilateral Contact Groups 2014).

In fact, the first Minsk agreement did not bring peace. The parties to the conflict continued fighting across the front-line, in particular around Donetsk airport. After the pro-Russian rebel’s victory at Donetsk airport, a new package of measures was agreed on 12 February 2015 (Minsk Agreement on Ukraine Crisis 2015). Although major offensive operations have been banned since 12 February 2015 (except for the Debaltsevo ‘pocket’), progress in other areas is limited and tactical fighting still goes on today.

Conclusion

In this chapter I argue that both Ukraine and Russia made initially flawed assumptions about intentions and the risks of escalation. These incorrect assumptions brought every side to a zero-sum strategy. When two opponents hold to a zero-sum strategy and neither side intends to compromise, conflict tends to be inevitable and protracted. In hindsight, Russia and Ukraine have realised the errors of their strategic thinking. However, it is unlikely that the understanding of mistakes will lead to conflict termination or settlement. The Minsk II Agreement proposes a plan of conflict settlement, but neither side demonstrates willingness to make concrete steps towards its implementation. Neither does it seem as if Ukraine, Russia or the West has a viable strategy to really change the situation any time soon.

Notes

1 Tetyana Malyarenko gratefully acknowledges support from Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation Fellowship grant (October 2015 – June 2016).
2 The opinion poll was carried out between 18 October 2008 and 9 November 2008. For all data from Razumkov Centre opinion polls see http://www.razumkov.org.ua.
3 This new term ‘Russian vacationers’ (in Russian – ‘otpuskniki’) appeared after Vladimir Putin’s explanation of Russian troops presence in the territory of Ukraine as soldiers who spend their vacations there.
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3 Neo-Eurasianism is a major contemporary Russian school of political-philosophical thought.
4 The theory which considers Eastern European countries as ‘geopolitical channels’ between Russia and Western Europe was proposed by leading Russian philosopher Vadym Tsymbursky in his article ‘The Island Russia: The Cycles of Europe’s Theft’. In this article the author compares Russia to an ‘island at the core of mainland’. According to Vadym Tsymbursky, as a geopolitical object Russia is an integral niche of the Russian ethnocosm, which lies at the East of the Western European civilisational platform; Russia is separated from liberal Western Europe by a belt of peoples and territories which border Western Europe, but do not form a true part of it. Due to their weak statehood, these countries periodically gravitate either toward Russian or toward Western civilisational platforms.

5 In post-modernist literature, art and philosophy bricolage is spontaneous and consistently changing process of creation of images and narratives from ‘material at hand’.


7 Official Kyiv acknowledges losses of 360 combatants in the battle for Ilovaysk city. However, both commanders of Ukrainian paramilitary battalions, for example, commander of ‘Donbas’ Semen Semenchko and leaders of pro-Russian rebels, for example, Igor Girkin (aka Strelkov) gave similar estimations of losses of the Ukrainian armed forces as 2.5 thousands killed during the battle within ‘pocket’ and 1 thousand killed during the attempt to leave it.

8 An opinion poll carried out between 8 and 18 February 2014 found 33 per cent of Donetsk’s residents in favour of unification of Ukraine with Russia compared to 24 per cent in Lugansk (two major pro-Russian regions in Ukraine). The majority of respondents would support Russia and Ukraine as friendly, but independent states. With the start of the armed conflict a significant part of the pro-Ukrainian population left the occupied territories for Ukraine.


10 Commonly referred to as Minsk I.
11 Minsk II.

Further reading


References


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