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THE DONBAS CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

ELITES, PROTEST AND PARTITION

Daria Platonova



The Donbas Conflict in Ukraine

This book examines why, when the conflict in eastern Ukraine began in 2014, fighting broke out in the Donets'k region, whereas it did not in Kharkiv city, despite the city being geographically proximate to Russia and similar in ethnic and linguistic make-up to the Donets'k region. Based on extensive original research, the book argues that a key factor was the nature and behaviour of the local elites and their interaction with the local protest in both regions. The elites in Kharkiv had diffuse ties to the centre and therefore were more capable of adapting to sudden, profound change of the government at the centre, whereas the elites in the Donets'k region had much more concentrated ties to the centre, were dependent on one network having access to power and therefore were much less able to cope with such change. The book thereby demonstrates how crucial for Ukraine are patronal politics, patronage networks and informal centre-region relations, and that it was these local political circumstances, rather than Russia, which brought about the conflict.

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Abbreviations

BYUT	Yulia Tymoshenko's Bloc "Bat'kivshchyna"
HOGA	Kharkiv Regional Administration Building
ISD	Industrial Union of Donbas
SBU	Security Service of Ukraine
SCM	System Capital Management
MVD	Ministry of Interior of Ukraine
OGA or DONOGA	Donets'k Regional Administration Building

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Note on transliteration

<i>Ukrainian version</i>	<i>Russian version</i>	<i>Version used in the book</i>
Donbas	Donbass	I have used the Ukrainian spelling of the “Donbas” in line with the established academic practice (see Swain, 2007).
Donets’k	Donetsk	I have used the Ukrainian version after A. Wilson (A. Wilson, 2016).
Kharkiv	Kharkov	I have used the Ukrainian version in line with the established academic practice and after P. Rodgers (Rodgers, 2008).
Hennadiy Kernes (mayor of Kharkiv)	Gennadii Kernes	I have used the Ukrainian version for consistency. The region never seceded from Ukraine.
Slov’ians’k, Horlivka, Makiivka	Slaviansk/ Slavyansk, Gorlovka, Makeevka	I have used the Ukrainian version after A. Wilson (A. Wilson, 2016).
Luhans’k	Luhansk	I have used the Ukrainian version after A. Wilson (A. Wilson, 2016).
Andriy Shyshatskiy	Andrey Shishatsky	I have used the Ukrainian version for consistency.
Mykola Levchenko	Nikolay Levchenko	I have used the Ukrainian version for consistency.
Pavlo Hubarev	Pavel Gubarev	I have used the Russian spelling for this pro-Russian activist.

Maps



Map 1 Map of Kharkiv region. Source: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/09/12/how-eastern-ukraine-is-adapting-and-surviving-case-of-kharkiv-pub-77216>



Map 2 Map of Donets'k region. Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/gb/vector/Donets'k-and-lugansk-regions-of-ukraine-vector-map-gm540597436-96570813>

Introduction

On 1 March 2014, Donetsk city council passed a unanimous vote for a referendum to be held on the future of the Donbas region. Surrounded by agitated pro-Russian protestors, Donetsk mayor Oleksandr Luk'yanchenko issued the following statement:

We support the people's initiative on holding a referendum on the territory of the Donetsk region about the future fate of the Donbas and we ask the deputies of Donetsk regional council to immediately call a referendum on the territory of the Donetsk region.¹

He also proclaimed Russia a strategic partner of the Donetsk region. As one of the pro-federalisation protest organisers in Kharkiv revealed to me in an interview, in 2014, the elites in Donetsk engaged in strategic bargaining with Kyiv: "In 2014, the oligarchic structures were trying to do the same thing that they did in 2004 when they proclaimed the Ukrainian Federative Republic." According to the organiser, this bargaining could have continued and spawned a local conflict, with protests and the storming and occupation of important state buildings, had it not been for the appearance of Igor Strelkov, who disrupted the local elites' bargaining plans. The bargaining was supposed to extract certain privileges, such as decentralisation or the referendum on federalisation, from the centre, and then the insurgency would have died a natural death (Protest Organiser 1; 24.09.2018). This observation was also confirmed in my interview with Journalist 1, an expert on the Donetsk region, who stated that Donetsk regional elites bargained with the centre "to preserve their money, freedom and status" (Journalist 1; 19.07.2019).

In the meantime, in Kharkiv, Luk'yanchenko's counterpart, Hennadiy Kernes, in an interview with a Russian journalist, stated that "calls for Kharkiv to join Russia are a 'provocation'." He repeatedly stressed that "Kharkiv is part of Ukraine."² On 3 March, Kernes made even stronger worded comments: "If we are law-abiding citizens and do not let our emotions overwhelm us, we will not allow our meetings to become a coup for the benefit of Russia."³ Kernes followed these statements through with a ban through a local court on the meeting demanding a referendum on Ukraine's federalisation on 13 March. He continued to state in his

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interviews that “Kharkiv is and will remain part of Ukraine”⁴ and never budged on the demand for a referendum with the activists in Kharkiv.

These seemingly disparate events form the larger narrative of what was to become a major political protest in Ukraine and then, from spring 2014, the largest conflict within Europe’s borders after the breakup of Yugoslavia (Strasheim, 2016). The Euromaidan revolution achieved the dramatic change of government, with the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich, and heralded major political and societal changes.⁵ The revolution also resulted in the most devastating military conflict in modern history of Ukraine in the Donbas area that has now been ravaging both the country itself and its breakaway regions for more than six years.⁶ The conflict started locally, when numerous anti-government protests in the Donbas were sparked by the radical changes of government and the new government’s actions in February 2014. In April 2014, the protests morphed into an insurgency, with the help of Russian military reserve officers, intelligence operatives and various non-state actors. In response, the Ukrainian government launched several offensives, some of which were successful, but, later, it was repeatedly repulsed by the separatist and Russian state forces. The conflict has “calcified” since then and become relatively low-scale.

The origins of the Donbas conflict have been widely discussed in the literature. The theories that have addressed the causes of the conflict fall into two broad paradigms. The first set of theories focuses on the role of history and identity in causing the Donbas conflict. Scholars working with these theories argue that the people in the Donbas developed an identity specific to the region. They cite sociological surveys and interviews demonstrating that, historically, the Donbas stood apart from other regions in Ukraine and its residents were particularly prone to support separatism. Following the eruption of violence in Kyiv in January–February 2014 and the sudden change of government in February 2014, the people in the Donbas protested and then mobilised for conflict because their identity was threatened by this change. To a certain extent, therefore, the conflict was bound to occur in the Donbas. The empirical literature within this approach is based on the larger theoretical literature on the roles of identities and emotions in conflict.

The other set of theories focuses on the role of foreign actors in causing conflicts. These theories are based on the larger literature which argues that “third parties,” usually neighbouring states, often get involved in conflicts. The overt purpose of this involvement is usually the protection of ethnic kin. As a result, we can expect a neighbouring state to be involved in a conflict in another state if the latter state is populated by the neighbouring state’s ethnic kin. Other theories within the same paradigm argue that a minority threatened by the government’s policies in the host state is likely to mobilise and radicalise if the ethnic kin state offers leverage to that minority. These findings have been applied to the conflict in Ukraine, and it has been demonstrated empirically and beyond reasonable doubt that Russian non-state actors were indeed involved in escalating what appeared to be a local conflict at first.

At the same time, the most recent research on popular attitudes towards the changes in Kyiv and separatism in the Donbas demonstrates that these attitudes

were complex and that they did not easily translate into popular mobilisation for war. My own empirical research also demonstrates that protest dynamics were very uneven in the Donets'k region and that overt political protest did not lead to conflict. Most importantly, if the Donets'k region is considered in a comparative perspective with a structurally similar city and region (such as Kharkiv), the history and identity approach is inadequate in explaining why conflict occurred in the Donbas. Kharkiv city and Donets'k region shared history, proximity to Russia, broad Anti-Maidan and pro-Russian popular preferences and the decade-long domination of one political party (the Party of Regions). The approach focusing on the foreign actors does not account for the period prior to the appearance of these actors and how political opportunities were opened for the specific types of activism that led to their appearance.

Based on the review of the two major approaches to the study of the Donbas conflict, I formulate the following research questions:

- Why would two regions with similar structural conditions predisposing them to similar protest dynamics take different trajectories?
- Why did the region with a greater general protest potential and greater propensity to protest violence choose a peaceful trajectory?
- Why would two regions geographically proximate to the “external patron,” or “ethnic kin state,” take two different trajectories?
- Who creates political opportunities for the specific types of activists?
- Why do the local elites create political opportunities for these specific types of activists?
- How do the specific types of activists use the political opportunities for protest?⁷

My own explanation of the Donbas conflict revolves around the comparison between the Donets'k region and Kharkiv city. Drawing on the literature on the political opportunity for protest, I argue that to explain the different trajectories taken by the two structurally similar regions, we need to focus on the behaviour of the local elites and activists in the period before the arrival of external agents and the macro-process of escalation to war in one region. That is, we need to focus on the pre-war period when outcomes were by no means certain (Tarrow, 2007; Shesterinina, 2014). In my argument, the phenomenon of the “Russian Spring” emerges out of the local Anti-Maidan contention in both regions.

In contrast with the history and identity approach, which – implicitly or explicitly – argues for the primacy of history, local ordinary people and their identities and emotions, I offer my own approach, which focuses squarely on the two groups of actors – the local elites and activists – and their rational action and interaction. In my story both regions display a comparatively similar propensity to protest and violence, with Kharkiv city being more prone to protest violence, as demonstrated through protest cataloguing and process tracing.

What contrast the two regions are the starkly different stances taken by the local elites towards the local protest and changes in Kyiv, and how pro-federal

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and pro-Russian activists used political opportunities for protest. In my story, the local elites created political opportunities for these activists. I explain that in Kharkiv city they did so in response to the Euromaidan protest that aimed to unseat them, while in the Donets'k region the elites opened political opportunities for the Anti-Maidan because they wanted to stay loyal to Yanukovich's government course.

Following the radical changes of the "informal governing network" in the centre in February 2014, when Yanukovich and his network of the Party of Regions ceased to govern the country and the rival networks of Yulia Tymoshenko and other parties antagonistic to the Party of Regions came to power, while the Party of Regions found itself significantly diminished in government, it is the exogenous shock of this change that informed the local elites' subsequent behaviour. I adapt conceptual insights from the literature on patronage, clientelism and, more specifically, Henry Hale's book *Patronal Politics* to explain the divergent behaviour of the local elites following the change of the governing network. I distinguish the city of Kharkiv and Donets'k region by the type of patronage that applies to their elites. These are diffused and concentrated types of patronage. I argue that in the city of Kharkiv, moderate pro-federal protest developed because the regional elites were functioning under a diffused patronage system. By contrast, in Donets'k, a concentrated patronage region, pro-Russian radicals took centre stage from the start. The result of these pre-war processes is that in one region, political opportunities for the intervention of foreign actors are closed off, whereas in the other they remain open (Activist from Donets'k, Interview 27.07.2019). Therefore, an external actor might start an insurgency in one region only after exploring options in all the regions susceptible to conflict (Protest Organiser in Kharkiv 1, Interview 24.09.2018; Protest Organiser in Kharkiv 2, Interview 28.09.2018; Yudaev, 2015; Strelkov's interview (Prokhanov and Strelkov, 2014)).

I treat the type of patronage in the region as the independent variable. I start with the basic assumption that regional elites are motivated by several concerns: they want to keep their power, protect their assets and have access to resources to distribute to their region and possibly themselves. Bearing this assumption in mind, the politics that they inhabit can be characterised by diffusion or concentration of patronage. In diffused patronage politics, regional elites from rival networks are placed next to each other by their patrons. Diffused patronage politics are "plugged into" various patronage channels through which resources are delivered and their elites are constantly engaged in close interaction with each other. This interaction leads to the process of elite learning through which elites acquire skills of negotiation with the members of rival networks. The elites in diffused patronage politics do not invest heavily in any particular patron, which enhances their ability to survive under any network. By contrast, the elites in concentrated patronage regions are heavily dependent on one political patron (Activist from Donets'k, Interview 27.07.2019). Resources are delivered to the region and the elites' assets are protected only when this patron has access to power in the centre. The elites in these regions rarely interact with the members of other networks. Instead, when the governing network changes in the centre, these elites rely on

stable bargaining ploys, such as encouraging political protest and separatism, in order to keep their concentrated patronage system. These systems of patronage are conditioned by the centralised nature of Ukraine and the political economy of the regions.

The intervening variable in my theory is the type of protest. Broadly, the type of protest is the protest that is either in the regional elites' interest or not. The elites therefore encourage the types of protest that are in their interest and they discourage the types of protest that are not in their interest. Empirically, I distinguish between the *moderate* pro-federal type of protest and *radical* pro-federal and pro-Russian types of protest. The elites in diffused patronage regions would discourage radical types of protest because these kinds of protest disrupt their relations with the centre and the rival networks. The elites in concentrated patronage regions would encourage radical types of protest because these types of protest have historically been part of their bargaining strategy with the centre. The outcome variables in my theory are peace or conflict. I argue that the elites send signals to external agents from the neighbouring states by opening political opportunities for specific types of protest. External agents from the neighbouring states, therefore, usually appear in concentrated patronage polities where radical protest is encouraged.

I therefore offer an interactive theory in which the main mechanism is the type of patronage in a clientelistic polity. Whether a political protest would develop along radical or moderate lines depends on the type of patronage.

Based on this brief review of the literature and my main argument, I draw the following testable hypotheses:

H1: the more intense the protest and protest violence in the region, the more likely it is to become the site of a violent conflict.

H2: political opportunities for protest that leads to war are created externally by ethnic patrons.

H3: the local elites would encourage or discourage specific types of protest depending on the regional patronage system.

To operationalise the type of polity, I look at the following indicators:

1. The networks to which the people occupying high-ranking positions in the local government, such as governors, mayors and the regional and city councils' deputies, belonged.
2. The nature of the regional political economy. I look specifically at whether the major enterprises in the regions were state-owned or private.
3. The frequency and nature of interactions between the clients in the regions and their patrons in the centre and between the clients of the different networks within the regions.
4. The kinds of resources that were delivered to the regions.
5. The nature of political conflicts in the polities and how the local elites dealt with those conflicts.
6. Historically, how the local elites re-coordinated themselves around the emerging patrons when the governing network changed in the centre.

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To operationalise the protest dynamics, I look at the following indicators:

1. Frequency of political protest in both regions prior to 2013.
2. Frequency of the Euromaidan and Anti-Maidan protests.
3. Frequency and nature of protest violence in 2013–2014.
4. The pro-federal and pro-Russian protestors' demands.
5. Local elites' actions and attitudes towards the protests.

In this book, I use the methods of process tracing and protest cataloguing. Process tracing allows to discover the causal mechanism at work in the process of protest. It usually points to the underlying patterns explaining events. On the other hand, protest or event cataloguing describes the aggregate patterns of protest. I have therefore used protest cataloguing to test the hypotheses about the political protest potential and protest intensity in the regions. I found that there were certain aggregate patterns of protest that could only be explained by using process tracing. For example, event cataloguing revealed that Russian flags, the flags of the radical movements such as Donetsk Republic and the chant “Russia” were present at almost all protest events of the “Russian Spring” in Donetsk (Interview with Journalist 1; 19.07.2019), whereas in Kharkiv the chant “Russia” and Russian flags gradually disappeared after 16 March 2014. In all, radical protest and clandestine armed mobilisation failed to emerge in Kharkiv. This was not because of the signals from the external patron Russia who, according to my interview with an activist in Kharkiv, sent signals to all the eastern regions (Interview with Activist in Kharkiv, 16.07.2019). Process tracing revealed how the political opportunities for radical protest were opened by the local elites and how these were used by the activists in the Donetsk region. Similarly, the aggregate patterns of attacks on ordinary people and violence against the elites can be explained by the inter-elite conflict, which process tracing also pointed to.

In the following chapter, I position the Donbas conflict in the broader empirical and theoretical literature. I analyse the major approaches to the conflict, such as history and identity and the role of foreign actors approach. I also examine the Donetsk region and Kharkiv city comparatively and offer my own theory based on the interaction of the two key actors – the local elites and activists. I provide the definitions of the local elites and then engage with the concepts derived from the literature on patronal politics and clientelism, as well as political opportunity, in order to elucidate my theoretical stance towards the conflict. In the second chapter, I discuss the methodology used in this book in more depth. I provide the analysis of the major sources of information and, when it came to interviewing people, how I managed to get access to them. In the subsequent chapter, I test the first hypothesis developed in the theoretical introduction to the study. Using protest cataloguing and process tracing, I reveal that Kharkiv city had greater protest potential than the Donetsk region, which predisposed the city to further destabilisation. Moreover, the dynamics of the Anti-Maidan and Russian Spring protests were similar in both Kharkiv city and Donetsk region, with Kharkiv city being more prone to protest violence. In the next chapter, I look at the systems

of patronage in Kharkiv city and Donets'k region and discuss my independent variable in more depth. I engage with the key concepts derived from the literature on patronage, such as actual acquaintance and past success of exchange, when discussing the independent variable. I demonstrate that the city of Kharkiv and Donets'k region developed as diffused and concentrated patronage regions, respectively. In the fifth chapter, I use the process tracing method to reveal the interaction of the independent and intervening variables in my main mechanism. More specifically, I process-trace the Anti-Maidan contention in both regions and then demonstrate how two different types of protest – radical pro-Russian protest and moderate pro-federal protest – developed in the concentrated patronage and diffused patronage regions, respectively. In the conclusion, I draw the lines of my main argument together.

Notes

- 1 “Pro-Russian rallies in south, east Ukraine demand referendums,” *BBC Monitoring Newsfile*, 1 March 2014.
- 2 “Programme summary of Russian RENTV “Nedelya” 1 March 2014,” *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, 2 March 2014.
- 3 “Gennadii Kernes: my zhivem i rabotaem po zakonom Ukrainy,” *Khar'kovskie Izvestiia*, 3 March 2014.
- 4 “Kharkiv was, will be part of Ukraine – mayor,” *Interfax: Russia & CIS General Newswire*, 13 March 2014.
- 5 S. Charap, E. Giuliano and M. Alexeev, “How changing Ukrainian Society impacts the chances for peace,” *Ponars Eurasia*, 6 March 2017.
- 6 “RFE/RL: UN says nearly 10,000 people killed in eastern Ukraine conflict since 2014,” *Kyiv Post*, 15 March 2017.
- 7 According to Stathis Kalyvas, insurgencies often witness “the lightning transformation of small, politically marginal groups into state structures” (Kalyvas, 2006, 258).

1 Explaining the Donbas conflict

Introduction

Given the long-standing Western security interests in Ukraine and the disputed role of Russia in the Donbas conflict, media and scholarly attention to the conflict has been intense. Journalists and academics present opposing views of its origins and nature. The explanations of the Donbas conflict have gone through several stages, from simpler (or monocausal) to more complex (or multi-causal). Earlier accounts are concerned with the comparative extent of the involvement of the locals, Russian citizens and Russia as a state in the conflict. The Ukrainian government, media and, to a large extent, their Western counterparts describe the conflict as having been “initiated, directed, supported and organized” (Umland, 2014) by Russian military intelligence operatives (GRU) and, later, regular Russian military units. *Ukrayinska Pravda*, the major online newspaper in Ukraine, portrayed the early protests in the south-east in spring 2014 as being led by Russian “tourists,” that is people bussed into Ukraine from over the border (A. Wilson, 2014, 128).¹ This makes the insurgency appear as lacking popular support (Katchanovski, 2016, 2). The Russian government and media, by contrast, present the conflict in the Donbas as a civil war that was sparked by the Ukrainian government’s attempt to suppress the Russian language and the popular uprising of the Donbas’ residents (Katchanovski, 2016, 4).

Scholarly works show similar differences in defining the origin of the Donbas conflict. A few scholars depict the conflict as a Russian invasion, from the start led by Russian military intelligence agents and ideological “volunteers” (Czuperski et al., 2015; Mitrokhin, 2014; Sutyagin, 2015). By contrast, in his book “Frontline Ukraine,” Richard Sakwa adopts a more cautious approach and argues that the provenance of the insurgents in Donetsk region was unclear, “but they were certainly not the ‘little green men’ who had operated so effectively and clinically in taking over the Crimea” (Sakwa, 2015, 155). He consequently characterises the conflict as local, with “genuine ‘popular support’” (Sakwa, 2015, 149). The exchange among Serhiy Kudelia, Andreas Umland and Yuriy Matsiyevsky in 2014 develops along similar lines, with Kudelia arguing that the conflict had primarily domestic sources, while Umland and Matsiyevsky depict it as Russia-led (Kudelia, 2014a; Kudelia, 2014b; Kudelia, 2014c; Matsiyevsky, 2014; Umland,

2014). Ivan Katchanovski (2016, 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 the Donbas and other regions of Ukraine (a similar argument is also made by Anna Matveeva (Matveeva, 2016)). Katchanovski cites the Uppsala Conflict Data Program statement on the conflict, which characterises it as intrastate, having started primarily because of domestic factors (Katchanovski, 2016, 4). Katchanovski thus characterises the conflict as “a civil war with both direct and indirect military intervention of a foreign state” (Katchanovski, 2016, 11), that is Russia, as do Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll,² and Lucan Way.³

In the scholarly literature, a great multitude of approaches have been taken to explain the conflict in the Donbas. Each assigns the primary importance to a different factor or a combination of factors. The approaches fall under several broad explanatory paradigms:⁴ the role of identity and history (Charap et al., 2017; Giuliano, 2015a; Giuliano, 2015b; Kuromiya, 2016; Loshkarev and Sushentsov, 2016; Matveeva, 2016; Matveeva, 2018; Sakwa, 2015; A. Wilson, 2016; A. Wilson, 2014); the role of the local political and business elites (Buckholz, 2019; Carroll, 2014; Hattori, 2014; Kazanskiy, 2014; Matsuzato, 2017; A. Wilson, 2016); the role of the regional socio-economic problems (Zhukov, 2016); and the role of Russia (Bowen, 2019; Davies, 2016; Kashin, 2014; Kuzio, T., 2015; Kuzio, 2017; Robinson, 2016; Shkandrij, 2014; A. Wilson, 2016; A. Wilson, 2014). Because of its exceptionally well-documented nature and the relatively easy access to the area before the start of the serious hostilities in summer 2014, it seems that the origins and nature of the Donbas conflict have been explained, and no questions remain.

Yet, certain questions are still unanswered, or they are answered intuitively by academics and journalists. The most pertinent of these questions is why, given their similar structural conditions, such as shared history, proximity to Russia, broad Anti-Maidan and pro-Russian popular preferences and the decade-long domination of one political party (the Party of Regions), did the city and region of Kharkiv and the region of Donets'k take such starkly different trajectories? Having looked closely at the history of the general political protest and the Euromaidan and “Russian Spring” protest waves in the city of Kharkiv and Donets'k region, I continue to posit this question. The strong argument offered in the academic literature and journalists' accounts is that the appearance of Igor Strelkov in Slov'ians'k, Donets'k region, on 12 April 2014, and the Ukrainian government's decision to launch the Anti-Terrorist Operation on 13 April 2014 to remove Strelkov and his squad, explains why there is war in one region and no war in the other. According to my interview with a (former) Ukrainian journalist (Journalist 1), this decision was guided by high politics and, more specifically, the Ukrainian government's view that the events in the Crimea and the Donbas were part of “one Russian scenario” (Interview 19.07.2019). However, this answer clouds our understanding of the pre-war dynamics and processes (Shesterinina, 2014), which might have figured in the mind of this external actor when choosing where to start the insurgency (Prokhanov and Strelkov, 2014). It effectively

conflates the micro-level and macro-level processes leading to war (Kalyvas, 2006; Shesterinina, 2014). By micro-level processes, I understand the decisions made on the ground by the local elites and activists and the extent of popular mobilisation. Macro-level processes involve the decisions made at the state level and by external actors. More concretely, Strelkov's appearance was highly contingent. This external actor might have well appeared in any other region in south-eastern Ukraine (for example, in Iziurm or Kupiansk in Kharkiv region) (Interview with Journalist 2 15.08.2018) (Prokhanov and Strelkov, 2014).⁵ I demonstrate in the empirical chapters that the reasons why Strelkov appeared in Donetsk region rather than in Kharkiv were connected to the decisions made by the local elites and activists in both regions. In effect, I provide an explanation of why Strelkov appeared in one region and not in the other.

In this chapter, I offer a discussion of the major approaches to the Donbas conflict,⁶ focusing especially on the history and identity approach and the "role of foreign actors" approach. I position the approaches within the larger literature, including the literature on civil wars⁷ and emotions and politics, and the literature on the role of elites in conflict. I introduce the city of Kharkiv as the comparative case that serves to underline the complexity of the Donbas conflict's origins.

Drawing on the literature on the political opportunity for protest, I argue that to explain the different trajectories taken by the two structurally similar regions, we need to focus on the behaviour of the local elites and activists in the period before the arrival of external agents and the macro-process of escalation to war in one region. That is, we need to focus on the pre-war period when outcomes were by no means certain (Tarrow, 2007).⁸ In my argument, the phenomenon of the "Russian Spring" emerges out of the local Anti-Maidan contention in both regions.

In contrast with the history and identity approach, which – implicitly or explicitly – argues for the primacy of history, local ordinary people and their identities and emotions, I offer my own approach, which focuses squarely on the two groups of actors – the local elites and activists – and their rational action and interaction. In my story both display a comparatively similar propensity to protest and violence, with Kharkiv city being more prone to protest violence as demonstrated through protest cataloguing and process tracing.

What contrast the two regions are the starkly different stances taken by the local elites towards the local protest and changes in Kyiv, and how pro-federal and pro-Russian activists used political opportunities for protest. In my story, the local elites created political opportunities for these activists. I explain that in Kharkiv city they did so in response to the Euromaidan protest that aimed to unseat them while in the Donetsk region the elites opened political opportunities for the Anti-Maidan because they wanted to stay loyal to Yanukovich's government course.

Following the radical changes of the "informal governing network" in the centre, it is the exogenous shock of this change that informs the local elites' subsequent behaviour. I adapt conceptual insights from the literature on patronage, clientelism and, more specifically, Henry Hale's book *Patronal Politics* to explain the divergent behaviour of the local elites following the change in the governing

network. I distinguish the city of Kharkiv and Donets'k region by the type of patronage that applies to their elites. I argue that in the city of Kharkiv, moderate pro-federal protest developed because the regional elites were functioning under a diffused patronage system. By contrast, in Donets'k, a region with a concentrated patronage system, pro-Russian radicals took centre stage from the start. The result of these pre-war processes is that in one region, political opportunities for the intervention of foreign actors are closed off, whereas in the other they remain open. Therefore, an external actor might start an insurgency in one region only after exploring options in all the regions susceptible to conflict (Protest Organiser in Kharkiv 1, Interview 24.09.2018; Protest Organiser in Kharkiv 2, Interview 28.09.2018; Yudaev, 2015; Strelkov's interview (Prokhanov and Strelkov, 2014)).

History and identity approaches

The scholars who seek to explain the Donbas conflict from the history and identity point of view argue that the people in the Donbas mobilised to defend their regional identity, their linguistic rights,⁹ and in response to the relative deprivation¹⁰ they felt after the change of government in Kyiv (Giuliano, 2015a; Kudelia, 2014a; Loshkarev and Sushentsov, 2016; Nicoara and White, 2016; Sakwa, 2015; A. Wilson, 2016; A. Wilson, 2014). Andrew Wilson (A. Wilson, 2016; A. Wilson, 2014) views this identity within the historical context and accounts for what gave rise to the peculiar political beliefs held by the residents of the Donbas. Anna Matveeva characterises the conflict as a conflict of identities in that “different sections of Ukraine’s population developed conflicting perspectives of the past, the role of Russia in Ukraine’s history, and of how relations with the West should evolve. These differences laid the foundations for what became polarised identities and mutually exclusive ideologies” (Matveeva, 2016, 25). These scholars cite numerous sociological surveys conducted both prior to the “Russian Spring” protests and as the protests were underway,¹¹ which demonstrate a higher propensity of the Donbas’ residents to separatism. They also discuss the various facets of this identity, such as localism conditioned by the poor integration of the Donbas into the rest of Ukraine, post-Soviet nostalgia and the fear of fascism, that might have contributed significantly to the anti-government feeling in the Donbas and, subsequently, to the onset of war (Giuliano, 2015a; A. Wilson, 2016).

Some scholars argue that the mobilisation in the Donbas occurred because of various popular emotions involved.¹² The work by Olga Nicoara and D. White (Nicoara and White, 2016), for example, focuses on the emotion of fear galvanised by the Russian propaganda and how important it was for the mobilisation in the Donbas. In his contribution, harkening back to the work of Roger Petersen, Serhiy Kudelia (Kudelia, 2014a) devotes some consideration to the argument that the people of the Donbas mobilised because they experienced intense group emotions, “specific to the region,” such as fear and resentment. According to Serhiy Kudelia and Andreas Umland, the violence perpetrated in Kyiv in January–February 2014 by both the Right Sector and other radical groups was approaching a scale Ukraine had never witnessed before (Kudelia, 2014a; Umland, 2014).

For Kudelia (Kudelia, 2014b), Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll,¹³ the conflict in the Donbas started with the violence erupting on Hrushevskiy Street in Kyiv on 19 and 20 February 2014, when the elites lost control over the radical forces and ultranationalist parties became more visible. The numerous marches held in honour of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Stepan Bandera during the Euromaidan provoked fears in the Donbas. According to one survey, Stepan Bandera was viewed in negative terms by 79% of the Donbas residents (Kudelia, 2014c). Sakwa cites similar findings, showing some 60% of Donets'k residents fearing "Bandera's followers," or "Banderovtsy" and 71% of Donets'k and 60% of Luhans'k residents believing that "the Maidan events represented an armed change of government organised by the opposition and the West" (Sakwa, 2015, 149). According to the local political elites in Donets'k, the "chaos and highhandedness (*proizvol*) on the Maidan" were the main causes of the pro-Russian resistance in Donets'k.¹⁴

Further, both the legitimacy and the composition of the new government announced on 27 February 2014 caused much consternation among the people of the Donbas, as, in contrast with the previous government, composed mostly of the Party of Regions' politicians loyal to Yanukovych, the new interim government consisted of politicians from Bat'kivshchyna and Svoboda parties which were historically antagonistic to Yanukovych and the Party of Regions.¹⁵ As Nicolai Petro argues, with the ousting of Yanukovych and the advent of the new government, "the Faustian pact" between the elites in Kyiv and the population was broken (Petro, N., 2015, 31). These sudden changes consequently resulted in the emotions of mistrust. It can also be said that there was a degree of "exclusion" (Cederman et al., 2010) which caused a further sense of deprivation among the people of the Donbas because there were no representatives of the Party of Regions in the new government. The surveys conducted in early April 2014 (widely cited by scholars) show that approximately half of all respondents in Donets'k and Luhans'k regions expressed strong confidence in the illegality of the interim president Turchynov and the new government, compared to about a third or fewer respondents in other south-eastern regions (KIIS poll, April 8 – 16, 2014).¹⁶ The new government therefore spelt threat to the population of the Donbas, as it violated their cognitive beliefs, that is, their beliefs about how the country should be governed. The advent of the new government, therefore, was, to an extent, "a moral shock" (Jasper, 1997) and a "threat to the quotidian" (Snow et al., 1998) for the people of the Donbas. In contrast to the year 2004, when the Orange Revolution similarly spelt threat to the Donbas residents, this time Yanukovych had little chance of coming back to politics, while the Party of Regions suffered major defections and eventually ceased to exist. I elaborate on this in the empirical chapter on the local elites and the chapter on the Anti-Maidan and Russian Spring.

Three powerful arguments emerge from this literature. In what follows I seek to situate these arguments in the larger literature, provide some analysis and introduce the city of Kharkiv as the comparative case. Firstly, it is argued that the violent trajectory taken by the Donbas was determined by its history. Andrew Wilson

(A. Wilson, 2016; A. Wilson, 2014) gives a nuanced account of the Donbas' history and argues that this history – partially, as he emphasises in the 2016 article – contributed to the conflict. The second powerful argument within the history and identity approach is based on the sociological surveys¹⁷ cited by scholars that demonstrate a greater propensity of the Donbas residents, and particularly of ethnic Russians, to separatism (Giuliano, 2018).¹⁸ Therefore, it is assumed that, due to this greater propensity to separatism (a minority opinion nonetheless (Giuliano, 2018)), the conflict was bound to occur in the Donbas (Gentile, 2015). The third argument is implicitly based on the literature on emotions and political violence and states that the emotions of fear and resentment galvanised by the violence and changes in Kyiv provided grounds for mobilisation and the subsequent conflict in the Donbas.

The argument based on the history of the Donbas provides us with helpful background knowledge of the region and its ethno-linguistic make-up. It gives us a sense of how the Donbas was integrated into the rest of Ukraine, without however specifying the exact nature of this integration. It also gives us an understanding of some of the major rhetorical devices, concepts and myths used by the agents of mobilisation in the Donbas, such as, to name a few, Novorossia, “a variable Russian term,” as Andrew Wilson calls it, which the Donbas belonged to in the Tsarist times (A. Wilson, 2016, 633 – 634), and Donets'k-Kryvyi Rih Republic (Donets'ko-Krivorozhskaiia Respublika in Russian), an entity formed out of Donets'k and Luhans'k regions that enjoyed a brief independence in 1918 (Gilley, 2015; Kornilov, 2017; Laruelle, 2016; A. Wilson, 2016, 635). Yet, it can also be argued that the historical approach – taking us back to the Tsarist times and beyond – is too “deep,” in that it cannot account for the behaviours of the two groups of actors we are concerned with – the local elites and activists – that have been conditioned by a more recent past and the process of protest, and how these contributed to the onset of the war. More importantly, when considered in a comparative perspective with a region that had a very similar history, such as Kharkiv region, the historical approach to the Donbas conflict provides an insufficient answer to the questions posed.

The identity approach to the Donbas conflict implies that identity has to be sufficiently strongly felt and cohesive to provoke people to commit violent actions.¹⁹ For example, the research by Anastasia Shesterinina on Abkhazia demonstrates that the Abkhaz developed a strong identity around the norms of “patriotism, heroism, and masculinity” (Shesterinina, 2014, 88), which eventually came into conflict with the Georgians. The Abkhaz experienced real threats in the past due to the turbulent history of Abkhazia. “The history of war,” Shesterinina (2014, 91) writes, “which subordinated Abkhazia to various powers and greatly reduced the Abkhaz population in Abkhazia, sharpened a sense of existential threat, attachment to the Abkhaz nation, and belonging to the land.” In the case of the Donbas, the picture is more mixed. The most recent research on attitudes in the Donbas has demonstrated how nuanced the attitudes of the Donbas' residents were both to the changes in Kyiv and to the pro-Russian protest. The new research by Elise Giuliano (2018) demonstrates that ethnicity does not map easily into political

attitudes, and that people with a defined ethnic identity can be divided on certain key political issues.²⁰ Her research into attitudes in the Donbas also demonstrates that the residents of the Donbas were “most concerned with economic issues, as well as with the threat of violent unrest and rise of radical extremism, rather than with geopolitical issues concerning Russia and cultural issues, such as language and media” (Giuliano 2018, 8).²¹ Furthermore, as Giuliano (2018, 2) writes, “well-attended separatist rallies, statements made by ordinary citizens, as well as popular opinion polls all provide evidence that genuine local support for separatism had developed by the time popular referenda on sovereignty were held in Donets’k and Luhans’k,” that is after the launch of the Anti-Terrorist Operation on 13 April 2014. This fluidity of identity and gradual hardening of attitudes after the launch of the ATO further highlights the need to consider the pre-ATO period, when the Donbas residents’ attitudes towards the issues were not contaminated by the repressive state action and were similar to the attitudes of the people in Kharkiv.

The identity approach implicitly engages the broader literature on emotions and politics and points to the primacy of ordinary people and their emotions in conflict. The voluminous literature on emotions and politics directs our attention to the importance of popular emotions for social movements, more generally (Aminzade et al., 2001; Goodwin et al., 2001) and conflicts, in particular (Baele et al., 2016; Bar-Tal et al., 2007; Petersen, 2002; Petersen, 2011; Petersen, 2001; Wood, E., 2001; Wood, 2003). It can be argued that structural conditions, such as shared history, as well as the presence of certain ethnicities and linguistic groups, predispose localities to certain emotional climates or orientations (Bar-Tal et al., 2007; Elster, 1999; Williams, 1977). Bar-Tal, Halperin and de Rivera (2007, 443) introduce the concept of “collective emotional orientation” and define it as “the tendency of a society to express a particular emotion.” To Baele et al., “members of any given group are characterized by a common particular way of apprehending and understanding the social world through a particular overarching logic,” which is called “emotional worldview” in their model (Baele et al., 2016, 723–724). They (2016: 724) define the emotional worldview as “an all-encompassing and coherent logic of understanding the social world that is based on the group’s collective memory itself made of socially constructed axioms ... and myths ... that are reproduced in language.” Emotions, in this way, are constitutive of social relations and action, and are not simply individual psychological reactions; they are intersubjective, collective experiences. These collective emotional experiences predispose people to react in certain ways to the change in their environment, be it social, economic or political change, in order to ensure their own survival (Newhagen, 1998). Empirically, we would, therefore, expect people with a shared history and emotional orientation to react to the changing environment in a similar way.

If we further engage with the literature on particular emotions, such as fear, resentment and anger – as hinted in the approaches taken by Nicoara (2016) and Kudelia (2014a) on the Donbas conflict – and apply its findings to conflict settings, we would find that both Kharkiv city and Donets’k region

were similarly predisposed to conflict, due to the emotions their residents were experiencing. The literature on emotions and conflicts suggests several pathways to violence. The emotion of fear, for example, arises when “a breakdown of the quotidian” (Snow et al., 1998, 1) or “suddenly imposed grievances” (Snow et al., 1998, 7) or a “moral shock” (a “moral shock,” as defined by Jasper, is “a reaction to an unexpected event or a piece of information that creates a sense of outrage to such an extent that an individual becomes inclined toward political action” (Jasper, 1998, 409)) occur by themselves or in different combinations. An event which “penetrates and disrupts, or threatens to disrupt, taken-for-granted everyday routines and expectancies,” the so-called quotidian (Snow et al., 1998, 2), can cause fear. When the quotidian breaks down, “routines and understandings associated with everyday patterns of making do,” Snow et al. (1998, 5) write, “are now matters of doubt, uncertainty, and sometimes even confusion” (Barbalet, 1998, 168). Fear can also occur in reaction to “suddenly imposed grievances” (Snow et al., 1998), which captures the sense of immediate threat that an accident or some change in the social order poses to the communities. In short, the emotion of fear arises as a result of unexpected and sudden changes in one’s surroundings, when the quotidian is disrupted or when there is a strong moral shock (Frijda, 1986).

Sudden changes in the environment, particularly when the status hierarchies are rearranged, with one ethnic group being suddenly downgraded, also cause the emotions of anger and resentment (Aminzade et al., 2001; Barbalet, 1998; Horowitz, 2000; Kemper, 1978; Petersen, 2002). Scholars highlight that the emotions of anger make people less risk-averse, whereas the emotions of fear make them more risk-averse (Bodenhausen et al., 1994; Bodenhausen, G., 1993; Frijda, 1986; Lerner and Keltner, 2000). The action tendency of fear, as defined by Frijda (Frijda, 1986, 72), is the urge to separate oneself from aversive events and preserve the self. Under the influence of anger, by contrast, particularly righteous anger, for example, in the face of blatant injustice, individuals begin to value their own security less and engage in risky behaviour, such as engaging in direct political action against economic and political status quo and assaulting government forces (Gamson, 1992; Lerner and Keltner, 2001; Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Pearlman, 2013).

If we look closely at the Anti-Maidan, pro-federal and pro-Russian protest dynamics in the two regions of Kharkiv and Donetsk, we discover that the people in those two regions were animated by similar emotions. The Euromaidan and the sudden change of government in Kyiv were the events of paramount, for some, life-changing importance. As Filippova and Giuliano (2018) demonstrate in their research on opinions in Kharkiv, many Kharkivites harboured strong Anti-Maidan attitudes, as did their Donetsk counterparts (anger and resentment) (Giuliano and Filippova, 2018). Many were equally concerned about the economic situation in Ukraine (fear) (Giuliano, 2018, 22). We would, therefore, expect both regions to be strongly emotionally affected by the violence and sudden changes in Kyiv. As a result, we would expect the people of Kharkiv and people of Donetsk, who resided in regions with arguably similar “emotional climates,” to be willing to

engage in protest with similar intensity and predisposition to violence. We would expect them to take to the streets with similar slogans, display a similar propensity to violence and occupation of central streets. In short, if we proxy the strength of the emotions of fear, anger, resentment and perceived grievance by the level of protest and protest violence, then we should expect to see similar protest dynamics in both regions.

Based on this theoretical discussion, we can formulate the first testable hypothesis:

H1: the more intense the protest and protest violence in the region, the more likely it is to become the site of a violent conflict

As I demonstrate through process tracing and protest cataloguing in Chapter 3, regions can demonstrate comparable protest dynamics and protest violence. In fact, the region that does not in the end become the site of conflict can demonstrate a greater propensity to protest violence; the violence there can be more systematic. The protest violence by itself, therefore, does not explain why one region evolves along a conflictual path and the other does not. It is not the scale of violence and the strength of popular emotions, but strategic actions by two distinct groups of actors – the local elites and activists – which determine peace or conflict outcomes. Additionally, from the methodological point of view, it is extremely hard to test the theories of emotions and politics because all the events in question took place in the past, and the participants' memories of these events can be faulty. Before developing my theoretical framework further, I highlight the geographical and historical similarities between the two regions of Kharkiv and Donets'k. Moreover, I demonstrate that Kharkiv region was considered "strategic" by the Ukrainian government.

Kharkiv and Donets'k compared

Kharkiv and Donets'k regions share the border with Russia. Kharkiv region's border with Russia extends to 315.5 kilometres, while the Donets'k region's border with Russia is 178.5 kilometres long. It takes approximately 30 kilometres to reach Kharkiv city from Russia. Both regions share a similar historical trajectory. From the late 17th century, the areas around Kharkiv were being populated by both Ukrainians and Russians (Matsuzato and Yakushik, 2002, 7, 9). Later on, Kharkiv city became one of the "heartland cities" of the Russian Empire and remained so for 200 years (Timofeev and Wade, 1994; Westrate, 2014, 46–48). Westrate (2014, 52) writes on Kharkiv:

By the late nineteenth century, many people considered Kharkiv a "Russian" city; others considered it a "Russified" city (different opinions of the same trend). The population was predominantly Russian-speaking; no more than a quarter of the city's residents considered Ukrainian their native language. (emphasis in the original)