

From Donbas Conflict to the Russian-Ukrainian War. A Review of Literature

DAVID R. MARPLES (ED.): THE WAR IN UKRAINE'S DONBAS: ORIGINS, CONTEXTS, AND THE FUTURE. BUDAPEST: CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY (CEU) PRESS, 2022.

DARIA PLATONOVA: THE DONBAS CONFLICT IN UKRAINE: ELITE, PROTEST AND PARTITION. LONDON-NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 2022.

JAKOB HAUTER (ED.): CIVIL WAR? INTERSTATE WAR? HYBRID WAR? DIMENSIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE DONBAS CONFLICT IN 2014–2020. STUTTGART: IBIDEM VERLAG, 2021.

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ABSTRACT	Using the conflict studies literature, the article classifies the latest scholarly writings on the origins of the Donbas conflict into three general groupings: on the role of the history and identity of the region's inhabitants, on the interference by "third" actors and on so-called contentious politics. The analysis suggests that the initial support of the uprising by Russia is usually greatly overestimated, and the level of social discontent and protest movements is underestimated. The study of contentious politics appears to be the most appropriate tool regarding the origins of the conflict. After 2015, the conflict took on, at least in part, the contours of an interstate clash, but the Donbas insurgency has continued to retain its authenticity. The failure of the 2015 settlement and the path to war after 2018 cannot be understood without considering the actions of Russia and those of Ukraine and leading Western states.
KEYWORDS	conflict, Donbas, clash of interpretations, origins, evolution, Russia, Ukraine, contentious politics
DOI	https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.777
PUBLISHED ONLINE	15 November, 2023

INTRODUCTION

This period of international conflict, with the conflict in Donbas and the current Russian-Ukrainian war being no exception to it, is not a favorable time even for researchers in the social sciences and humanities. They, too, face political pressures and find it difficult to escape representations of international realities by the political elites and the predominant pro-Russian (in the case of Russian media space), pro-Ukrainian and pro-Western framing and narratives of the conflict in the case of Euro-Atlantic mainstream media. Policy proposals on how to proceed vis-à-vis Russia were far from uniform within the Euro-Atlantic world in the years leading up to the Russian invasion in February 2022. Yet the mainstream view of the origins of the conflict in eastern Ukraine had long before acquired a dominant pro-Western frame there. The Russian attack further reinforced and sharply strengthened it. However, it seems that at least in some other parts of the world, the pressure of the “official” interpretation of the major media is not so pervasive as in the case of Russia and the Western world.

With the continuation of the war, even critical authors opposing the dominant frames will undoubtedly focus mainly on the period of the last few months before the Russian invasion, at most on the period after Volodymyr Zelensky’s ascension to the presidency in April 2019 (cf. ROBERTS 2022; KRICKOVIC – SAKWA 2022). From this point of view, the studies pursuing the beginnings of the Ukrainian conflict can become an important supplement or even corrective to this orientation. *The War in Ukraine’s Donbas*, edited by David R. Marples, a well-established and prolific Canadian-British writer and connoisseur of the history of Ukraine and Belarus,¹ the volume *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014–2020*, edited by Jakob Hauter, a young PhD candidate at University College London (UCL), and the published version of the PhD thesis of Daria Platonova, a former doctoral student at King’s College London, all belong to that category.

All three, but each in a different way, thematize the issue of the beginnings and transformation of the Donbas conflict, or some of its aspects during 2014–2015, in some cases, even up to 2018. Unlike Platonova’s monograph, which focuses exclusively on the elucidation of the emergence of the conflict, the two edited volumes, and Marples’ in particular, cover

a truly diverse set of topics concerning the social characteristics of the conflict, possibilities of its solution, Russia's strategy, etc. While the information-rich collection of Marples, originating from a conference held at the University of Alberta in November 2018, includes ten texts, either from the field of contemporary history or that of social sciences, most of the authors of Hauter's volume offer primarily political science-oriented studies, especially from the subfield of conflict studies. The dividing line between the two volumes is not a crude dichotomy of theory and empirical research, although theory appears more often in the latter. I cannot discuss all the thematically and methodologically disparate essays in Marples' volume here. Therefore I want to at least point out the papers contained therein based on field research, especially the ethnographic kind, of social groups involved in the conflict: this topic is mainly covered by the text of Nataliia Stepaniuk on the role and perception of volunteer soldiers in the conflict (STEPANIUK 2022), the chapter by William J. Risch on how the residents of Donbas perceived the events of the Kyiv Maidan (RISCH 2022), and the texts by Oksana Mikheieva and Kamitaka Matsuzato about the motivations for the involvement of pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian fighters, and the metamorphoses of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) respectively (MIKHEIEVA 2022; MATSUZATO 2022).

This discussion article is divided into three parts. It focuses primarily on two areas of the origins and evolution of the conflict that form the core, or at least part of it, of the volumes under discussion and several dozen related writings. In the first section, I will probe into the different approaches to the study of conflict in the fields of modern history and social science during the recent decades in order to apply them to the Donbas conflict in the next two.

THREE GENERAL APPROACHES TO THE CONFLICT

The study of conflict, not just international and violent conflict, usually includes various approaches that differ from each other; for example, these approaches differ in terms of their conceptual sources and the disciplines they make use of (RAPOPORT 1995) or in terms of the levels of the analysis; for a pioneering text in this regard (SEE SINGER 1960). Some of these approaches receded into the background of interest or became downright anachronistic

over time. Others remained in the domain of disciplines not primarily engaged in the field of regional or international studies.

The conflict studies in the post-Soviet space and elsewhere in the European-Asian and African space during the previous decades built mainly upon the renewal of ethnopolitical or ethnonational conflicts in the early 1990s. Part of this research could tend towards a rather mechanical interpretation which pitted states against “ethnic groups” on the one hand, or “people” on the other: it was built on the opposition of majoritarian policies of nation-states and minorities’ policies on their territory (GURR 1993; BRUBAKER 1996). However, many supporters of these approaches reflected that the “Russian minority” in Ukraine does not have to understand itself as a “minority” and that the very phrase “Russian speakers” is “itself an ambiguous term”. Moreover, in the first decade after the collapse of the USSR, it became clear that neither Ukraine nor Russia pursued anything like nationalization policies and they did not even perceive problems from an ethnic point of view (RECKTENWALD 2000: 57, NOTE 1 ON P. 63; KULYK 2001: 217–221; THE ESSAYS OF GURR 2000).

Given this outline, one can guess that the three volumes under review do not offer a complete variety of perspectives on the study of conflict, its sources and the direction of conflicts, but they do offer their most significant part. Approaches to the Donbas conflict can most often be broken down along the line between internal and external factors and only secondarily according to disciplinary divides; for an overview (SEE KATCHANOVSKI 2016: 476–477; PLATONOVA 2022: 2–3; WILSON 2016: 631–633; KUZIO 2017: 8–17). At least three broad perspectives can be distinguished. They are not uniform and do not reach identical conclusions, and sometimes even diametrically opposed ones.

The first, anchored in the research of internal factors, connects the conflict with the history and identity of the inhabitants of the area. It is by no means new in post-Soviet and regional studies. It came into general awareness in its probably most famous version at the end of the 1990s at the latest with the well-known study of the Japanese-American historian Hiroaki Kuromiya. Using Benedict Anderson’s concept,² Kuromiya characterized Donbas as an imagined community whose features “*embod[y] the characteristics of the wild field – freedom [‘freedom from’], militancy, violence, terror, independence*”. It was a place where diverse ethnic groups gathered,

and where people did not necessarily identify with Russia or Ukraine, but rather with a variety of real or imagined communities. Nevertheless, Donbas “has always functioned as an ‘exit’, or refuge, an alternative to political conformity or protest”, thus affecting the behavior and identity of its inhabitants (KUROMIYA 1998: 12, 41–42, 48, 64, QUOTE ON P. 4). Kuromiya does not draw so much from the theory of ethnicity as from the “historicist” and “modernist” schools of nationalism. However, by accepting some elements of social constructivism and cultural history (SMITH 1998: 5–6, 117), he goes beyond the original contours of these approaches.

The adherents of the identity approaches find certain reasons for the support for separatism or political loyalty to Russia in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, but they deny that these reasons are one-dimensional or static. Their separatism was shaped by ethnic, linguistic and political aspects, as well as various forms of material interest or a sense of betrayal by the central government (GIULIANO 2015A: 2; CF. ALSO IDEM 2015B; IDEM 2018). Another author who recently did research at King’s College London argues 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”. Frankly speaking, in her view, the clash in Donbas is an “identity conflict”, while identity cannot be considered a fixed category and is “affiliated more with region than ethnicity” (MATVEEVA 2018). After all, Kuromiya himself recently stated that even if the thesis about Donbas as a “stronghold of Russian separatism” is a “popular misconception”, it cannot be doubted that at least in the early stages of the conflict, the separatists had considerable support there (KUROMIYA 2019: 245, 259–260; CF. ALSO KUROMIYA 2015).

The second broad stream discussing the conflict, usually contrasting with the first, continues the tradition of research in the field of international relations and foreign policy emphasizing the role of foreign actors or “third parties” – most often neighboring states – in the emergence of conflict. This approach usually draws more heavily on ethnicity theory when it links the foreign actors’ cross-border intervention with two aims. These two aims include the protection of ethnic kinship abroad through either the direct establishment of the “protector” state or the indirect mobilization of a “protector” state by an ethnically related minority in a neighboring state threatened by that state’s central government (SEE SOME OF THE PAPERS IN CARMENT – JAMES 1997; LAKE – ROTHCHILD 1998; LOBELL – MAUCERI, 2004).

While in the West this belief is perhaps best exemplified by the works of the UCL historian Andrew Wilson, in the East numerous Ukrainian academics share it (see part three): one of its most prominent adherents is the British-Ukrainian political scientist Taras Kuzio (ESP. KUZIO 2017). Wilson does not deny the role of historical and identity factors or fears of the inhabitants of the Donbas; in contrast to Kuromiya, he finds them rather in the Khrushchev period of consolidation of the society of the area (WILSON 2016: 631), but nevertheless, he pluralizes them. The alienation of the region's inhabitants from Kyiv was a sufficient starting point for localizing the civil conflict, but *“all the key triggers that produced all-out war were provided by Russia and by local elites in the Donbas”* (IBID.). Think tanks that help Western governments push their political agendas attribute the war to Russia even more directly. A study published under the umbrella of the Washington, D.C.-based *Atlantic Council* speaks without scruple about a *“Kremlin-directed war”* in which *“Russian leadership was evident from the beginning”* (CZUPERSKI – HERBST ET AL. 2015: PREFACE, 4). Within this group of interpretations, however, we also find, especially among followers of some streams of IR realism, an entirely opposite normative tendency attributing the main responsibility for the conflict to NATO expansion to the Russian borders and Western support for the regime change in Kyiv (CF. MEARSHEIMER 2014). Yet it overstates the NATO factor as a motive for Russian policy, while at the same time making the West an overly homogeneous actor with unified political interests and goals. However, Mearsheimer's interpretation of this sort is not as simplistic as his numerous critics now suggest.³

The third grouping of interpretations regarding the Donbas events focuses on the dynamics of popular attitudes in relation to the developments in the center (Kyiv) and the region itself. They draw mainly, although not exclusively, from the historical-sociological or historical-social scientific research, as it was developed by the American sociologist and historian Charles Tilly in his shift from structuralist Marxism. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Tilly laid the foundations of what he refers to as *“relational realism”*, an approach stressing the role of interactions, transactions, conversations, and social ties as pivotal agents of social life – in opposition to behavior and ideas (TILLY 2008: 7–8; 2003: 5–9). The core of this kind of research consists of the study of so-called contentious politics, i.e., the use of diverse disruptive techniques, usually by opponents of the government against it or its agents, with the aim of asserting their demands. Social movements

play a significant but not exclusive role as the instigators of contentious politics (MCADAM – TARROW – TILLY 2001: 4–7; TILLY – TARROW 2015: 7–14, XII; LICHBACH 1998: 406–407). In the case of Ukraine, the Russian-speaking population groups in the east of the country took advantage of the situation after the fall of the Yanukovych regime and seized the territory and its leadership.

From the overview, it seems that the intellectual positions within these perspectives – though with some exceptions – appear to be nuanced and even complex and thus potentially compatible. However, the academic debate about the conflict, not just in the early stages, was similarly heated as the political and media debates at that time. A sharp clash took place between the supporters of the thesis about domestic (identity) sources of the uprising and those pointing to Russia’s central role in it (HAUTER 2021A: 12; KATCHANOVSKI 2016: 476–77; MELNYK 2020: 4).

ORIGINS

In this part, I will focus on the problem of the sources and causes of the Donbas conflict, as mirrored in the reviewed volumes. The exposition takes into consideration that the issue is not always addressed to the same extent in all the books: while in Hauter’s volume, only a significant minority of the text focuses on it, Platonova’s book is devoted entirely to it. The central question here is aptly summarized by Hauter in the “Conclusion” of his volume: at the heart of the academic divide is the question of whether Russia merely supported the key actors involved in the outbreak of violence and thus the local aspect of the conflict escaped external control, or whether Moscow controlled these actors and the Russian intervention in the conflict became the defining moment (HAUTER 2021B: 216–217).

When in Marples’ collection, the Ukrainian-born political scientist Serhiy Kudelia expresses one of the strongest supportive views for the proposition of an authentic domestic origin of the protests,⁴ this is certainly not a surprise. He was the leading proponent of this thesis since the first round of this academic debate in 2014 (CF. KUDELIA 2014), for a short summary (HAUTER 2021: 11–12), for the later version of his argument (KUDELIA 2016). According to him, there is almost a consensus that the regional identity of the people of Donbas is unique, and its strength is persistently proven by empirical research. Unlike many other secessionist attempts, the

non-ethnic nature of Donbas's "*urban melting pot*" can satisfy "*everyone who settles there*". Accordingly, Kudelia argues that the conflict preceded the wave of protest mobilization in many cities of the Donetsk and Luhansk region which was supported by some local regional councils, which, *inter alia*, led to the formation of the local self-defense units (IBID.: 206–207).

William J. Risch expresses a substantially different opinion in a paper devoted to the perception of the events of the Kyiv Maidan by the residents of Donbas. He acknowledges that the Euromaidan protests in Donetsk were "small" and that only 13% of the respondents in the eastern regions supported the Kyiv events, but believes that a number of rumors and stereotypes about the Kyiv events "*did not appear spontaneously*" and that the Kremlin aides Vladislav Surkov and Sergei Glazyev "*had directed efforts to coordinate and organize these protests at the beginning of March 2014, turning them into a pro-Russian separatist movement*" (RISCH 2022: 9, 11, 20–26, QUOTE ON P. 26; CF. ALSO RISCH 2020).⁵ Oleksandr Melnyk, in his otherwise careful essay on Ukrainian military casualties and "inter-communal ethics," takes – apparently due to his dissimilar subject – a rather agnostic position on the beginnings of the conflict (MELNYK 2022: ESP. 139–155, 126–128).⁶ His point is much clearer in another text devoted to the operation of the protest movement in the southeastern Ukraine cities in March and April 2014. Yet, despite the author's initial support for multi-causality, his admission that there was "*a lot of spontaneity*" in the anti-Maidan movement and his declaration that the armed uprising was "*hardly a predetermined outcome of the Russian government strategy*", he argues for the prominent involvement of Russian state actors in the pursuit of a "*constitutional reformatting of a rump Ukrainian state*" (MELNYK 2020: 4, 16–28, QUOTES ON PP. 25, 18). Melnyk's claims about the links of Russian policies to the Donbas events are based largely on reports from Russian press agencies and information about the activities of Russian non-governmental groups and, therefore, largely unsubstantiated. Thus, if he introduces his text as an empirically based attempt to fill a gap in the research of the "*activities and interrelationship between different indigenous and external state and non-state actors*" (IBID.: 4–5), then his attempt is unsuccessful.⁷

Perhaps the only text in the two edited volumes that is close in nature to "relational realism" and the study of intergroup politics, is the text by the Japanese lawyer Kimitaka Matsuzato. It primarily deals with the

transformation of the DPR organization as a de facto state throughout its first four years. Matsuzato's proposition, based on repeated field research in Donbas at least in 2014 and 2017 and expressed in his previous studies, is that until the spring of 2014, no one really expected the pro-Russian organizations to achieve anything important in the Donbas. Until the summer of 2014, Russia did not want to get more involved there and intended to leave Donbas for Ukraine (MATSUZATO 2022: 48, 52–53). Matsuzato's previous texts are even more indispensable for understanding the origin and dynamics of the events. In the most crucial essay (MATSUZATO 2017), he clarifies the future role of Donbas from the point of view of the present social discontent and the collapse of the patronal regime: the local elites wanted to use the so-called Novorussian movement to negotiate with Kyiv, but the situation got out of their control and the local revolutionary romantics seized power. The Russian intervention took place only at critical moments of the revolutionary movement and its condition was the cleansing the movement of its "founding fathers" such as Igor Girkin (CF. ESP. IBID.: 176–177, 188–196; MATSUZATO 2022: 52–56).

The book of Daria Platonova, which basically develops Matsuzato's theme, is a straightforward epitome of sociological research on the area's social movements and contentious politics. In her view, the protests during the "Russian Spring", the period from the end of 2013 to the end of March 2014, arose from local anti-Maidan contentions. Contrary to the identity approach she asks the crucial question of how political opportunities for specific types of activism in the Donbas emerged. To answer this, she compares the seemingly identical situations in the Donetsk and Kharkiv Oblasts, which, however, had completely different outcomes (PLATONOVA 2022: 2–3). Using a catalogue of protest events in the period of 2002–2013 and the numbers of their participants deduced from the reports in online newspapers, she concludes in the third chapter that the city of Kharkiv itself had a greater potential for destabilization and eventual conflict than the entire Donetsk Oblast; however, this capacity persisted in both areas during the "Russian Spring" (IBID.: 80–94, 94–105).

However, it follows from the violent outcome in the Donetsk Oblast that the capacity for protest alone does not explain the occurrence of war. To clarify it, Platonova connects the political opportunities and capacities with the action of local elites in the fourth and fifth chapters of her book.

The factor that, according to the patronage and clientelism literature, illuminates the different outcomes is the different types of patronage. While the Kharkiv Oblast developed into areas of (in Hale's terminology) "diffused patronage" which was never linked by the center in Kyiv through a single patron, the Donetsk Oblast, mainly due to its strong economic position and the presence of key industries, developed a system of "concentrated patronage" where elites rely on their preferred client network, never switching to other networks (IBID.: 111–112, 117–126).⁸ In by far the most comprehensive analysis of the events of the "Russian Spring" up to today, Platonova proves that just for that reason were the political outcomes in the two areas since the key moments after the collapse of the Kyiv (Yanukovych) regime at the end of February 2014 so different. While in Kharkiv the activities of elites led to the suppression of radical protest (activism), regional elites in Donetsk were not able to establish effective control over the radicals and, on the contrary, converged with their demands. Platonova's final verdict is sharp: "(W)hen [Igor] Strelkov [Girkin] arrived in Donetsk and the Anti-Terrorist Operation began, it was too late to bargain" (IBID.: 180–218, QUOTE ON P. 242).

No matter the intellectual backing of Platonova's research, similar arguments regarding the pivotal role of elites can be found in some previous essays, even if they do not employ sociological theories. Andriy Portnov, a critical Ukrainian lawyer, repeatedly indicated, using the example of Dnepropetrovsk during the crisis, that "*the sudden 'conversion to patriotism' [...] resulted from a combination of different, often situational, factors*": besides the resolute stance of the pro-Ukrainian minority and the relative weakness of pro-Russian activists, it was mainly the action of a group of people around the billionaire Ihor Kolomoisky (E.G., PORTNOV 2015: 65–66; CF., ALSO, BUCKHOLZ 2019).

Ulrich Schneckener and Maximilian Kranich are the only contributors to Hauter's collection who acknowledge local actors' central or significant role at the beginning of the conflict. The former, an IR researcher from the University of Osnabrück, deftly challenges two frequent interpretations of the conflict in academic and journalistic writings: "hybrid war" and the geopolitical narrative. In addition to its unclear or contradictory definitions, the dubiousness of the first consists in its integrated design, an orchestrated sequence of moves. The latter fails mainly because of its uniform hegemonic top-down logic, which does not consider the agency

and motivation of local actors (SCHNECKENER 2021: 42–53). Kranich discusses the role of the myth of the Great Patriotic War in the violence in Donbas while acknowledging that in the case of the period from November 2013 to May 2014, “*it is by no means possible to speak of an interstate war in the Donbas*” (KRANICH 2021: 82). This is fully consistent with what Kudelia, Katchanovski, Matveeva, and others claim elsewhere.

As a partial judgment here, at least three points can be made. First, perceptive authors recognize multicausality – in this case, the certain effect of all three factors: the specific history and identity of the area, the activities of local elites and activists, and the influence of Russia. However, given that the actions of individual actors “*did not all have an equal impact*” (KATCHANOVSKI 2016: 487; CF. MELNYK 2020: 5), the authors usually stick to Carr’s thesis that a true historian “*would [...] decide, which cause, or which category of causes, should be regarded [...] as the ultimate cause, the cause of all causes*” (CARR 1978: 89–90). Second, although authors focusing on the role of group and elite policies often rightly separate themselves from the identity and history approaches, in the end, they support a similarly focused argument about the domestic sources of the conflict (even though not the same interpretation). Third, the authors of the second grouping attempt to substantiate the official Russian influence on events, but a significant part of their evidence is circumstantial and partly has a tinge of conspiracy theories.⁹

EVOLUTION

Separating the beginnings of a conflict from its course can sometimes be tricky, especially when there is no general agreement on the period in which the origin of the rift could be found. I will focus here more on the nature of the Donbas conflict, especially in the period from the summer of 2014 until about the end of 2015, for which the presence of a number of foreign volunteers, but also the direct presence of some members of Russian military units, is documented. The central question here is one that can be summarized as follows (CF. HAUTER 2021A: 12, 12–14): Who is closer to the truth – those who emphasize the role of local factors and understand the conflict primarily as a civil war or those who see Russia’s pivotal agency and depict it as at least the embryonic stage of an interstate war from the beginning? Not only do scholars differ in their verdicts, but Russia’s, Ukraine’s and Western countries’ differing understandings of its nature

since 2015, as we will point out later, have had far-reaching normative implications for its future course.

All the contributors to the second and third parts of Hauter's anthology speak in favor of the interpretation of the Donbas conflict as an international conflict, albeit sometimes with reservations. Naturally, the most interesting are the arguments with which they buttress individual judgments. The editor himself, who previously published his paper in the *Journal of Strategic Security*, uses the example of Ukraine to show the need to expand the typology of conflict within conflict studies and within the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Hauter's intuition that within the category of "international conflict," there is no comparable subdivision as in the case of "intrastate conflict" and that the subcategory "internationalized internal armed conflict" does not sufficiently cover the nuances of the Russian engagement in Ukraine (HAUTER 2021C: 148, 152–153),¹⁰ may not be wrong. However, it must be added that the "delegated interstate" conflict he introduced is quite possibly a hollow intellectual exercise. It is based on the questionable assumption that there was no authentic domestic insurgent (rebel) group in Donbas, a view refuted by many authors, at least in part also by Melnyk (KUDELIA 2014; LARUELLE 2016; O'LOUGHLIN – TOAL – KOLOSOV 2017: 126–130; MELNYK 2020: 30, 33). In addition, whether the conflict is a "mixed" type of interstate or, conversely, intrastate ones, could be primarily a matter of arbitrary choice. Indeed, another contributor to the volume, Sanshiro Hosaka, using a different typology, namely Correlates of War (COW), argues, on the contrary, that because of the location of the fighting within Ukrainian territory and the early substantial role of the DPR and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) units, the initial attempts to classify the conflict as "international" or "interstate" were doomed to failure (HOSAKA 2021: 95).¹¹ Moreover, Hauter's discussion of the actual course of the clash is really just an exhibition of the labelling of the conflict by Ukrainian and Russian authorities and area studies researchers (HAUTER 2021C: 153–157).

Like Hauter, Nikolay Mitrokhin and Sanshiro Hosaka view the conflict in Donbas primarily as an interstate conflict, and assign a pivotal role to Russia, although the latter does so with a reservation. Hosaka's virtue is that he unequivocally attempts to separate the initial phase of the insurgent struggle (primarily the clash between secessionist entities and the central government), which falls more under the category of "civil war",

from its later transmutation mainly into an “extra-state” (interstate) war (HOSAKA 2021: 94–96). He bases his claim on the identification of the “primary combatant” as the one “causing the greatest number of battle deaths” (the COW criterion). He then derives his thesis about the major role of Russia from the correlation between the documented presence (activity) of members of specific Russian military units on the Donbas territory from June 2014 to March 2016 and the figures of killed Ukrainian combatants over time (IBID.: 100–107). From this point of view, Hosaka’s approach does not lack a certain conceptual rigor.

Considerably less satisfying, intellectually, conceptually, and in terms of evidence, is a piece by the Russian-German historian Nikolay Mitrokhin. He discusses the “Russian War in the Donbas” by breaking it down into three phases and mapping the distinct actors involved in each of them.¹² His interpretation is built almost exclusively on rather anecdotal accounts of individuals and groups and, with some exceptions, completely lacks more systematic evidence of their connection to official Russian policy (MITROKHIN 2022; PLATONOVA 2022: 27–28).

The Ukrainian author Yuriy Matsiyevsky himself is completely true to his own statement that most Ukrainian experts – unlike most Western authors – give the greatest weight to Russia’s direct and indirect involvement (MATSIYEVSKY 2022: 166–168). Matsiyevsky reaches this conclusion predominantly based on two small surveys of 13 participants and 25 experts respectively. Even if it is legitimate research, the result is not very conclusive. (The answer that the conflict was primarily the result of “Russia’s targeted action” was preferred by 15.2% of the academics.) In addition to the formulation of the questions, it is also problematic that 14 of the academics work in Kyiv and another five in the west of the country. More startling, however, is Matsiyevsky’s strongly defamatory claim from the conclusion that the challenge for the followers of the opposite perspective (that of internal conflict) is their “*Russo-centric view*” (IBID.: 179–181), THE LIST OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE EXPERT SURVEY (IBID.: 190).

Apart from Alina Cherviatsova’s essay on the “hybrid nature” of the Minsk Agreements,¹³ no other text in Marples’ collection primarily addresses the question of the overall nature of the conflict, although at least three others deal with it indirectly. Perhaps Cherviatsova’s main shortcoming

lies in her inability to critically confront the conclusions of the resolutions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union (EU) and/or the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal (ICC), which speak of Russian “aggression” or even a “war against Ukraine” (CHERVIATSOVA 2022: 31–35): she is not even able to compare the not wholly identical positions of the institutions.¹⁴ Partly similar conclusions can also be drawn from the chapter of Alla Hurska on the Russian strategy in the Sea of Azov, and that of Sergey Sukhankin on the involvement of Russian private military companies (PMCs) in the fighting in Donbas, both depicting Russian policy with the fashionable label “hybrid” strategy or warfare (HURSKA 2022: 160; SUKHANKIN 2022: 185–188). Their image, but especially Sukhankin’s, of Russian foreign policy is largely predetermined and takes the form of a persistent pursuit of long-term goals through the same methods of “hybrid warfare”. References to Russia’s opposition to the unipolar world, the expansive conception of the “Russian world” (HURSKA 2022: 166, 179) or its “Eurasian imperial policies” (SUKHANKIN 2022: 182) cannot themselves contribute to understanding the specifics of the case – Russia’s motivations, and strategic and tactical objectives regarding southeastern Ukraine. However, this does not mean that Hurska’s discussion of the previous multiple disputes between Russia and Ukraine regarding the Sea of Azov (HURSKA 2022: 167–171) has no informative value. When Oksana Mikheieva, in her essay, declares that the conflict was a Russo-Ukrainian armed confrontation, the instrument of which was the “*imitation of a civil war*” through the creation of regional militias (MIKHEIEVA 2022: 67–68), she does not intellectually support her thesis in any way.

Several other authors in Marples’ collection deal with some aspects and dimensions of the Donbas conflict, but by far the most extensive information for the entire period of 2014 is given by Melnyk. He does his part with a perhaps surprising but factual statement that despite the geopolitical importance and human losses, the conflict was “*rather limited – whether in terms of the involvement of the population, the intensity of the fighting, the number of casualties, or the scope of violence against non-combatants*” (MELNYK 2022: 124). However, this conclusion is far from exceptional, at least among perceptive war studies theorists. Thus, they acknowledge that the means and ends of both sides of the conflict were limited and do not hesitate to

attribute this to the mutually shared cultural and military norms and values (KÄIHKÖ 2021: 26).¹⁵

There is already an extensive debate on the past possibilities of resolving the conflict through the Minsk agreements, and the reasons for their failure. The authors largely accept that the slightly higher accommodation of “Minsk II” of February 2015 to the interests of the separatist entities was mainly a consequence of Ukraine’s previous defeats (CHERVIATSOVA 2022: 38; ÅTLAND 2020: 137). The perceptive scholars attribute the failure of the agreement to multiple factors – in addition to its vague language, legalistic issues and the situation on the ground, there were also the factors more associated with the actions of both Russia and Ukraine (CF., E.G., ÅTLAND 2020: 133–136; WITTKE 2019: 284–285). Ukrainian officials accepted the agreements but perceived them as bad and kept emphasizing that the conflict was solely an act of “Russian aggression”. On the other hand, Russia argued that Ukraine was never committed to the political clauses of the agreements. Although steps were taken in the subsequent period to implement the agreements (through the so-called Steinmeier Formula in October 2016, the U.S.-Russia “Ukraine Track” in 2017–2019, Putin’s initiative for a limited U.N. peace-keeping operation in September 2017 and the resumption of discussions in the framework of the so-called Normandy Four in November 2019) (CF. CHARAP – KORTUNOV 2019: 1–2; WELT 2020), arguably the further they moved away from February 2015, the less likely they were to be fully implemented.

The horizon of Marples’ volume of papers hardly exceeds Zelensky’s election with a large majority of votes in the 2nd round of the presidential elections in April 2019. Thus, only the editor himself tries to briefly recapitulate his policy after taking office in the “Introduction”: unlike his predecessor Petro Poroshenko, who “gradually adopted a hostile attitude to Russia that precluded any compromise or revival of the Minsk Accords”, Zelensky was heading towards “bringing an end to the Donbas conflict” (MARPLES 2022A: 1). However, with this statement Marples substantially overestimates Zelensky’s “efforts to end the war in the East”, since he only illustrates this with a certain, albeit “slow” exchange of prisoners and the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from border areas of the DPR and LPR (MARPLES 2022A: 2). It is paradoxical because even Wilson, who is certainly not uncritical of Russia’s policies, considers both steps to be just as inadequate as Poroshenko’s military approach (CF. WILSON 2021: 7). Far more noteworthy

than the emphasis on Zelensky's original "dove-like nature" is the shift in Ukrainian foreign policy away from the efforts to deepen contacts with Russia that occurred in late 2019, six months after Zelensky's election. A closer look suggests that the domestic pressures that caused it were like those faced by his predecessor after the signing of the 2015 accords: fierce pressure from radical-right groups, which was heard by the new head of the presidential office and the president's "right-hand man", Andriy Yermak (GALOUCHKA 2020: 3), on Poroshenko's policies (SCHNECKENER 2021: 40–41).

The assessment of Western states' policies towards the Donbas conflict is not clear-cut, both because of the absence of a single overarching institution (the EU was perhaps the closest to it) and because of the not entirely identical interests and policies of individual states. At the international organizations level (the EU, the PACE, the OSCE) states have strongly condemned the "Russian aggression". In practice, however, the EU member states have adopted a position described by some as "*principled pragmatism*" (BOSSUYT – VAN ELSUWEGE 2021), which apparently refers to the EU Global Strategy launched in 2016. Notwithstanding that Germany and France can be credited with concluding the Minsk agreements, the approach of some other leading Western (or NATO) states, the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, etc., has been more provocative and confrontational. Such approaches included substantial sales of sophisticated arms, recurrent declarations of commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity against "Russian aggression", the conduct of repeated military exercises with Ukraine and, ultimately, NATO's reaffirmed commitment to Ukraine's membership in the alliance. The US sanctions were far broader than the European ones. Even an "appropriate" Russian behaviour towards Ukraine could not lead to their lifting (CHARAP – KORTUNOV 2019: 3; CARPENTER 2021; CF. WALKER 2023). Misperceptions of many EU and NATO member states about Russia may have undermined their efforts to politically avert the Russian invasion. At the same time, some of the above-mentioned actions by Western representations may have simultaneously fueled Russian misperceptions about the West and subsequently encouraged Russia's aggression (MINZARARI 2022: 1–2), for an earlier prediction (MARTEN 2015: 100–102).¹⁶ It may even be surprising that in a recent interview, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel called the Minsk agreements "*an attempt to give Ukraine time*", i.e. to achieve the possibility of Ukraine defending itself (DIE ZEIT 2022).

Though Russia's actions since February 2014 establish a significant foreign policy escalation, they also constitute a perpetuation of a more assertive Russian policy since the mid-2000s. However, the key decisions of 2014 (and also of 2022) were hardly predetermined. They should be seen as significantly contingent, linked to the international context and influenced by the dynamics of the mutual misunderstanding with the principal Western states (KRICKOVIC – SAKWA 2022: 91–102; TSYGANKOV 2015: 286–294; TOAL 2017: 210–214, 279–302; CF. MARTEN 2015: 100–102).¹⁷ The sources of this dynamic, which can be referred to as a “*conflict of ontologies*” (KRICKOVIC – SAKWA 2022) or, more culturally, as a “*conflict of ways of life*” (WILLIAMS 1980), have been present for decades. In retrospect, however, it seems that after 2018, a mutual intransigence has transformed the tension and contradiction between “freedom of choice” and the “indivisibility of security” into a seemingly inevitable clash.

Both of the dominant mainstream interpretations within IR theory, the liberal and the realist one, may convey some grain of truth regarding Russian conduct, but both fall short of the complexity of Russian foreign policy. The first fails by overestimating Russian fears of the spread of Western values in the country while simultaneously entirely neglecting and not recognizing Russia's distinct values. The second goes wrong since it conceives Russian foreign policy exclusively or predominantly in terms of traditional geopolitics and the invariable “spheres of influence”.¹⁸ In short, in assessing the course of events after 2015, Russia's actions, as well as those of Ukraine and leading Western states, must be considered.

CONCLUSION

With the turning of the conflict in eastern Ukraine into a full-fledged Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022 and also into an ever-intensifying conflict between Russia and the West, it seems as if the prehistory of the conflict has lost its momentousness. While it can hardly be doubted that the post-2022 conflict, not to mention its international dimension, will be at the center of future research, the publications discussed attest that what preceded it does not lose its importance.

The first two parts of the text introduced three general approaches to the Donbas conflict. They are separated by significant conceptual and theoretical differences but also by normative divides, sometimes

even within the approaches. Not a few of their adherents maintain a significantly greater distance and impartiality than is usual in the current media and public space. However, the writings of many scholars mirror contemporary political and moral divisions regarding the conflict in the West as well as in Ukraine and Russia. At least two approaches had their counterparts in the state rhetoric and propaganda: the identity approach manifested itself in the Russian government's rhetoric regarding the "civil war", and the overemphasizing of Russian interference and intervention is a dominant component of both Ukrainian and Western discourse on the Donbas conflict.

What conclusions can be drawn about the premises and claims of the three general interpretive approaches? As for the identity and historical approach, without denying the specific effects of the Donbas territory on its inhabitants, the common attempt to explain the conflict by pointing to the "pro-Russian" attitudes of the inhabitants of the region is inconclusive. Even the local ethnic Russians have been (and are) split on the issue of separatism. But this doesn't necessarily lead to the opposite conclusion – that the sources of the conflict are groundless or superficial.

As for the role of "third" parties, and especially Russia, a significant majority of authors agree that it has changed over time. Russia began to play a more direct role in the conflict in mid-July 2014 and as a result, the early civil conflict was, at least in part, transformed. However, the initial support from Russia is greatly overestimated and at the same time, the level of social discontent and authenticity of the protest movement within the Donbas territory (the Novorussian movement and its successors) is underestimated in a significant part of the writings of Ukrainian and Western authors. Russia's role in the events is then misinterpreted along the lines of mainstream political and media opinion in many cases. As Katchanovski notes, *"foreign governments alone could not have been able to covertly seize power in Donbas and Ukraine, respectively, and to produce large numbers of activists and supporters"* (KATCHANOVSKI 2016: 480).

The key contribution of the third group of interpretations consists in both the method of sociological and ethnographic research focusing on the actual relations between local and regional actors, and the thoroughness of the investigation based on field research and in-depth interviews

supplemented by primary and secondary sources. These approaches, as the writings of Kamitaka Matsuzato and Daria Platonova attest, make it possible to capture the dynamics of events in the area and the links to the outside in the best and most accurate way. Given the absence of documentary evidence of the Russian leadership's motivations (public records remain the best available evidence), in-depth research into groups, individuals and movements in the area is the right way to get as close to the truth as possible. Platonova's comprehensive study is an excellent example of the merits of young scholars' current social science research. Research on contentious politics, similar to approaches focused on identity (as represented by the writings of Kudelia or Matveeva), justifiably makes a point about the local roots of the Donbas conflict. However, unlike the latter, it finds it in situational and relational facets within which the social movements in the Donbas developed.

As part three showed, there is little doubt that the character of the Donbas conflict was transformed by Russia's military intervention after July 2014. However, the intervention was not uniform over time – it had its peaks and troughs – and effectively ended towards the end of 2015. Because it was a response to the setbacks of the original Donbas insurgency, the clash is more accurately described as an “internationalized civil conflict” than as a “delegated interstate conflict”. The latter designation ignores the centrality of the original insurgency and calls into question the straightforwardness of the causality since Russia did not “*create and control local militias*”, as Hauter claims (HAUTER 2021A: 16).

The analysis of the subsequent events after the Minsk agreements and the post-2018 path to war itself will undoubtedly be the subject of much further scholarly interest. However, the concept of mutual misunderstanding, different perceptions and understandings of reality, and especially security, and, more generally, the different identities of Russia and the West (and, gradually, Ukraine as well) will have to be an important element in explaining the events that have occurred. Although it was Russia that started the war in February 2022, the path to it was considerably more complicated than is often claimed today. The actions of the Ukrainian leadership and principal Western states cannot be ignored.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Cf. Marples 2017; Marples – Mills 2015 and several others.
- 2 Anderson's book became one of the most influential studies in the social sciences in the following decades. See Anderson (1983).
- 3 Leaving aside the theory on which he relies, by the West he primarily means the US. In addition to NATO expansion, he also mentions EU enlargement and the process of democracy promotion in this respect (Mearsheimer 2014).
- 4 Let's note that Kudelia's text in the volume is almost exclusively devoted to the settlement of the Donbas conflict and its resolution.
- 5 A lot of information, even in essays emphasising Surkov's (i.e., Russia's) role, suggests that the activists in Donetsk acted autonomously and did not even want Russia's involvement. Cf. Hosaka (2019); Shandra – Seely (2019).
- 6 Melnyk is especially interested in the way the bodies of combatants were treated by Ukrainian government authorities and non-governmental organizations. Occasionally he also discusses the way in which military casualties were used by both opposing sides in their information war (Melnyk 2022: 137–138).
- 7 If he initially specifically mentions "official Kyiv [e.g., official Kyiv government, Author's note], oligarchs and other local power holders, Western governments, agencies of the Russian state, [and] pro-Russian organizations in Ukraine" (Melnyk 2020: 5), then except for the pro-Russian organizations, the other actors are almost absent in the text.
- 8 In this case she relies primarily on Henry Halle's study (see Halle 2015). Platonova documents patronal politics using examples of regional budget negotiations, among others.
- 9 An example of this is the depiction of Vladislav Surkov's actions in the texts cited in note 5. For a more realistic picture, see Matsuzato (2022: 44–45).
- 10 For some similar points see Hosaka (2022: 90–95) and the paper of Timofii Brik (Brik 2022).
- 11 Let's emphasize that representatives of the UCDP justify their research approach on the premise that the coding of the conflict must be unambiguous, and, accordingly, all three categories of conflicts (state-based, non-state and one-sided violence) are "mutually exclusive" in their research. UCDP Methodology. Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, <https://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/methodology/#tojump_2650597979080307_3>.
- 12 This structuring has been culminating with the third phase and the involvement of a larger number of members of Russian troops in the conflict from August 2014 onward (Mirokhin 2022: 132–136).
- 13 By the "hybrid nature" of the agreements, Cherviatsova means that they did not constitute a binding international agreement and did not become part of Ukrainian legislation.
- 14 However, we should distinguish between the sharp response of these institutions to the Russian annexation of Crimea and their more debatable judgment of the events in eastern Ukraine.
- 15 Even though the Russian-Ukrainian war has been conducted in an often brutal and ruthless manner over the past year and a half, it is not entirely irrelevant to ask whether respect for at least some of these norms has persisted throughout the conflict.
- 16 However, Minzanari's rejection of the West's gradualist policy approach towards Russia after the invasion strikes me as highly questionable (Minzanari 2022: 5–8).
- 17 These four understandings of the motivations behind the Russian decisions, and Putin's in particular, regarding the Ukrainian crisis, are not identical, but they overlap with or complement each other in essential ways.
- 18 Toal also provides some insights about this, but he mistakenly attributes the same geopolitical incentives to the liberal interpretation of Russian behavior as to the "realist" one (Toal 2017: 20–54, esp. 20–21).

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NOTE

I would like to thank Daniel Šitera of the CJIS editorial team for his advice, both reviewers for their insightful critical comments, and Lukáš Kantor for his selfless feedback on the manuscript.

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