

Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia's War in the Donbass¹

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Abstract: This article surveys and analyzes the evidence on the nature of the Russian military presence and the changing composition of the “separatist” forces in the armed conflict in the Donbass region of Ukraine throughout the period of April-August 2014. It identifies three distinct phases in the conflict, each of which was characterized by the involvement of a different set of actors and forces operating on the pro-Russian side. It argues that the available evidence demonstrates conclusively that the new “republics” in the Donbass received vital assistance from Russia in the form of military manpower and materials throughout this period, including regular soldiers sent to the region from August 2014.

Introduction

In late August 2014, oppositional Russian journalists and bloggers informed the citizens of their country that there was now abundant reliable evidence that Russian soldiers were fighting and dying on the territory of Ukraine.² While Russian involvement in the

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- 1 This text is a translated, expanded and revised version of an article previously published in Russian: “Grubye liudi”, *Grani.ru*, 27 August 2014; and in German: “Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion. Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine”, *Osteuropa* no. 8 (2014): 3–16. A further revised and expanded Russian version is to be published in *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* under the title “Pochemu rossiiskie voennye pogibli v ukrainskoi stepi”.
 - 2 The most large-scale investigations into this issue were conducted by *Novaia gazeta*, the *Dozhd'* TV channel, and the regional newspaper *Pskovskaia guberniia*. For a summary, see Viktor Rezunkov, “Gorod, kotoryi zhdet grobov”, *Radio Svoboda*, 7 September 2014, www.svoboda.org/content/article/26571243.html. For a list of military units participating in the operation and general

hostilities in Ukraine has long been clear to informed observers, the new evidence gathered and made available within Russia has now dispelled any remaining doubts about this. In this article, I survey and analyze the available evidence on the nature of the Russian military presence and the changing composition of the “separatist” forces, with the aim of reconstructing the logic of the process whereby Russian soldiers were drawn into this war. I draw upon a range of sources, from journalistic and other civil investigations to data gathered from the separatists’ own reports and data. This evidence confirms what has been clear to many people for some time: the viability of the project aimed at creating separatist “republics” in the Donbass is dependent on the constant supply of new materials and military manpower from Russia. Furthermore, the evidence points to the fact that Russia’s reserves of “volunteers” now appear to have been exhausted. Consequently, in mid-August 2014, Russia began to send regular soldiers to Ukraine. These latest reinforcements are fighting not for ideological motivations or material incentives, but on the direct orders of their military superiors.

In this article, I divide the armed conflict in the Donbass region that began in spring 2014 into three distinct phases, each of which was characterized by the involvement of different actors and forces on the pro-Russian side. The first phase began in April 2014, when special forces (*spetsnaz*) troops and secret service officials supported criminals from the Donbass region and Russian nationalists who had traveled in from Russia with the aim of seizing power in several cities in the Donbass region, as part of a Russian special operation aimed at destabilizing Ukraine. In the second phase, from mid-May, huge numbers of former fighters from the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya and politicized supporters of

statistics on known casualties, see Ivan Zhilin, “Yest’ informatsiia o 38 rossiiskikh voinskikh chastiakh”, *Novaia gazeta*, no. 1, 12 January 2015, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/66773.html>. The most detailed personal list of the dead as at late December 2014 is available here: “Otkrytaia Rossiia ustanavlivaet lichnosti pogibshikh iz spiska ‘Gruz-200’”, *Otkrytaia Rossiia*, 26 January 2015, <https://openrussia.org/post/view/1772/>. This article draws widely upon the research conducted by *Novaia gazeta* and *Dozhd’*.

Russian neo-imperialist organizations recruited by conscription officers in Russia streamed into Ukraine. When the Ukrainian army nonetheless managed to interrupt the supply line from Russia to Ukraine, Moscow sent in regular soldiers, in the second week of August. This marked the beginning of the third phase. Russian regular soldiers fought back against the Ukrainian army and forced a (very fragile) ceasefire, formalized in the Minsk Protocol of 5 September. From a military perspective, this was a victory for Russia. From a political perspective, the outcome of the war remains completely open.

Phase 1: “Armed Uprising”

A political movement calling for the Donbass region to be annexed to the Russian Federation has existed in the region since the late 1990s. This movement was previously made up numerous small, non-influential and disparate groups with diverse ideological and cultural orientations, including Cossacks, paratroopers (*desantniki*), Orthodox activists, neo-Nazi-neo-pagans, and supporters of neo-fascist publicist Aleksandr Dugin.³ In March-April 2014, these ideologically motivated “separatists”, to use the Ukrainian terminology, were pushed out of the political arena by the “militia” (*opolchentsy*)—to use the term favored by Russian state media. In my view “pro-Russian fighters” is a more appropriate label and this is the term that I generally use in this article.

These new actors who now appeared on the scene in the Donbass were largely unknown quantities, with no track record in politics or in public life more broadly. They proceeded to use violence as the primary means of solving political problems and eliminating their political opponents.

In the first phase, marked by the armed seizure of power in several cities in the region from 12-20 April 2014, the pro-Russian fighters comprised several different groups. The main strike forces

3 For more detail see Nikolay Mitrokhin: “Transnationale Provokation. Russische Nationalisten in der Ukraine”, *Osteuropa*, 5-6 (2014): 157-174.

were primarily made up of gangs of minor criminals who purchased support amongst the stratum of disaffected and disadvantaged young people known colloquially as *gopniki*. These criminals had an interest not only in escaping prosecution by the Ukrainian authorities but also in displacing the old mafia bosses dominating the region. The billionaire Rinat Akhmetov is frequently mentioned in connection with the latter. The economic and political elite in the Donbass region, who are closely associated with Akhmetov and who formed the core support for the Party of Regions, clearly did not want the Donbass region to be annexed to Russia, as this would undoubtedly have undesirable ramifications for them, including the redistribution of assets. The lower-level ranks of the criminal and semi-criminal world, on the other hand, from gang leaders through to the corrupt militia officials linked to them at the district (*raion*) level, had much to gain from a radical upheaval of this kind.

The example of Crimea was an influential model here. If a minor crime boss such as Sergei Aksenov (a.k.a. “Goblin”)⁴ could become Prime Minister of Crimea, then why shouldn’t Valerii Bolotov, who was part of the group surrounding Aleksandr Yefremov, head of the Party of Regions faction in the Ukrainian parliament, and who was in charge of overseeing the illegal mines in the Donbass region, try to become Prime Minister of the Luhansk People’s Republic?⁵ Why shouldn’t a minor official like Igor’ Bezler (a.k.a. “Bes”, or “Demon”), who was in charge of the burials department in the municipal administration in Gorlovka, become boss of that city of 300,000?⁶ And why shouldn’t Aksenov’s old school friend, the former officer and failed entrepreneur Sergei

4 “Aksenov Sergei Valer’evich (‘Goblin’). Spravka”, *ORD.ua*, 6 March 2014, http://ord-ua.com/2014/03/06/aksenov-sergej-valerevich-goblin-spravka_1/.

5 Bolotov was the initiator of the seizure of the Luhansk regional administration. See further “Kar’era terrorista Bolotova: voditel’ u Yefremova, smotriashchii za kopankami”, *Informatsionnoe soprotivlenie*, 12 June 2014, <http://sprotyv.info/ru/news/1112-karera-terrorista-bolotova-voditel-u-efremova-smotryashchiy-zakopankami>.

6 “Igor’ (Bes) Bezler: nachnem nastuplenie, kogda protivnik vydokhnetsia”, *RIA Novosti*, 16 July 2014, <http://ria.ru/interview/20140716/1016094469.html>.

Zdriliuk (a.k.a. “Abver”, from the German *Abwehr* or “defense”), be put in charge of Kramatorsk, a city with a population of 150,000?⁷

Other examples of lower-tier officials and criminals who rose to positions of power in this period include Vasili Nikitin, failed entrepreneur and swindler who was LNR “prime minister” from 18 May to 7 July 2014, the first of four successive prime ministers in the space of just four and a half months.⁸ Information on the biography of the current head of the DNR Aleksandr Zakharchenko is especially hard to come by. We know only that having failed to complete a tertiary education course, he worked in “small business” and ran “coal industry collectives”.⁹ After the Maidan events, by his own account, Zakharchenko “grabbed a spade and dug up my personal machine-gun from under the flower-bed. Apart from the machine-gun I also had two pistols, a crate of grenades and a sniper’s rifle there”.¹⁰ The provenance and intended purpose of these weapons is unclear.

But the rebel leaders were not all minor crime bosses and third-rank officials. Some of them, at least, are officers or residents of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) or the military Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), and are also citizens of Russia. While very little detail is generally known about their biographies, piecing together the fragmentary information that is available in the public domain enables us to identify two key characteristics that they all have in common.

First, all of them have served in the Soviet and/or Russian army, some of them as officers, and many are linked to veterans’

7 “Zagadochnyi ‘Abver’ s Vinnitsy, kto on?”, *Iskra* (Zaporozh’e), 24 May 2014, available: <http://il-vn.com/vinnitsa/item/1393-zagadochnyj-abver-s-vinnitsy-kto-on>. Zdriliuk took part in the seizure of Kramatorsk as a member of the detachment led by Igor’ Girkin, and was subsequently in charge of Kramatorsk for several months. “Prem’er-ministr LNR voroval ne tol’ko shapki”, *Informator.su*, 25 June 2014, <http://www.informator.su/premer-ministr-lnr-voroval-ne-tolko-shapki/>.

8 Ibid.

9 “Sovmin progolosoval za novogo prem’era DNR—Aleksandra Zakharchenko”, *Novosteman.ru*, 7 August 2014, <http://novosteman.ru/sovmin-progolosoval-za-novogo-premera-dnr-aleksandra-zaharchenko>.

10 Cited Marina Akhmedova, “Nachal’nik Donbassa”, *Ekspert Online*, 9 October 2014, http://expert.ru/russian_reporter/2014/39/nachalnik-donbassa/.

organizations (partly those representing the airborne forces). Second, all of them are also either newcomers to the Donbass region, having first arrived there at some point over the past decade, or natives of the Donbass region whose biographies also include substantial spells of residence in Russia in the 1990s-2000s. This applies to Igor' Bezler, officially a GRU Lieutenant Colonel and part of a GRU special forces group in Sloviansk and former head of the Association of Veterans of Airborne Forces in Gorlovka;¹¹ and to Valerii Bolotov, veteran of the Soviet war in Afghanistan and former head of the Association of Veterans of Airborne Forces in the Luhansk region. It likewise applies to Igor' Plotnitskii, the founder and commander of the *Zaria* battalion and Minister of Defense of the Luhansk People's Republic, who worked in the heavily criminalized fuel trade in the Russian city of Penza in the 1990s after completing specialist artillery training and was later a minor official responsible for the quality control of fuels.¹² Aleksandr Zakharchenko's father lived his whole life in Russia. Zakharchenko himself studied at the Interior Ministry's Donetsk Juridical Institute and has described himself as a "military man" (*kadrovyy voennyi*).¹³

The pattern also fits Sergei Zdriliuk, who underwent military training first in Ukraine, and later in Russia; Viacheslav Ponomarev, the "People's Mayor" of Sloviansk (March-June 2014), another Afghan veteran, who moved to Sloviansk from Kiev just a few years ago; Pavel Dremov, "Commander of the Garrison to Defend

11 Pavel Kanygin, "Bes, Fiks, Roman i goluboglazyi", *Novaia gazeta*, 17 April 2014, www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/63245.html. Among the pro-Russian fighters too Bezler is generally considered to be a "GRU man"; see the interview Yelena Kostiuchenko conducted with a volunteer: "Armiia i dobrovol'tsy", *Novaia gazeta*, 3 September 2014, www.novayagazeta.ru/society/65096.html.

12 Plotnitskii graduated from the Penza Higher Artillery Academy in 1987 and until 1991 served in the Soviet army; "Novyi glava LNR Igor' Plotnitskii—biografiia", *Natsional'naia Sluzhba Novostei*, 20 August 2014, <http://nsn.fm/hots/igor-plotnitskiy-biografiya.php>.

13 Cited Akhmedova, "Nachal'nik Donbassa". In June 2014 Girkin assigned Zdriliuk the rank of major, but it is unclear whether he previously held officer ranking or whether this was awarded to him in recognition of his actions as leader of fighter detachments.

Severodonetsk”, a veteran of the conflict in Chechnya¹⁴ with a criminal record for serious violent offenses in Ukraine;¹⁵ and Aleksei Mozgovoi, leader of a large rebel unit in Lysychansk, whose previous activities include working as a military recruitment officer, and later as a construction laborer in Moscow. The abovementioned LNR “prime minister” Vasilii Nikitin has not done military service but is a native of Russia who moved to Ukraine after completing school.¹⁶

Second, the group with the least military significance but a high degree of political significance in April 2014 was the local pro-Russian activists, representing a large range of small to very small organizations. It was their presence that made it possible for the storming of local administrative buildings to be depicted as a “spontaneous” and “popular” uprising, as a kind of Donbass regional variant of the Maidan, rather than an event with external backing.

For example, on 2 April, a “Civic Coordination Council” made up of representatives of a few dozen pro-Russian groups was founded in Luhansk. On 21 April, a “Popular Regional Assembly” elected Valerii Bolotov People’s Governor and passed a resolution to hold a referendum on the territorial status of the region. However, on 27 April, the Coordination Council published a declaration of sovereignty for the Luhansk People’s Republic, and on 29 April the “Army of the Southeast”—a military formation under the command

14 “Glavnyi gorodskoi terrorist—Pavel Dremov”, *SevDon.net*, 8 July 2014, <http://sevdon.net/novosti-sayta/3877-glavnyy-gorodskoy-terrorist-pavel-dremov.html>. According to the Ukrainian side, Dremov fought in Chechnya on the side of the federal forces.

15 Ibid. Dremov took part in the seizure of Severodonetsk and now controls Stakhanov, a major city in the Luhansk region. Dremov was previously a bricklayer and as he himself put it in an interview, a “bandit”; cited Marina Akhmedova, “Ataman Dremov mezhdru smekhom i strakhom”, *Ekspert Online*, 30 December 2014, <http://expert.ru/2014/12/30/ataman-dremov-mezhdru-smehom-i-strahom/>. In the same interview Dremov stated that he had spent six months in prison on charges of major fraud (“I wasn’t guilty, I was just coming back from visiting my girlfriend”). He also mentioned that he had spent “three years in a monastery”, but it is unclear whether he was using the term “monastery” as a euphemism for “prison” here. As a former “*Gastarbeiter*-bricklayer”, Dremov keeps an apartment in St Petersburg and by his own account was viewed by locals as a Russian outsider (“*moskal*”) during his raids on his home town.

16 “Prem’er-ministr LNR”.

of Bolotov—stormed the most important administrative buildings in Luhansk and several other cities in the region. Since 21 June, a Civic Council made up of approximately fifty different pro-Russian groups has been “attached to the Prime Minister of the Luhansk People’s Republic”.¹⁷ In some cases, these activists have also been involved in violent actions. Before the seizure of Sloviansk, for example, the fighters were assembled at the local Orthodox cultural center that was run by a dyed-in-the-wool Russian nationalist, the priest Vitalii Veselyi.¹⁸

The fate of the most famous of the ideologically motivated separatists, Pavel Gubarev, is eloquent testimony to their real significance. Gubarev became famous in March 2014 as leader of the rallies at the Donetsk Regional Administration, which saw him “elected” as the region’s “people’s governor”. He was soon arrested by the Ukrainian Security Service and after being exchanged for captured soldiers in May he was appointed head of the DNR Defense

17 For a brief chronology of the events from the perspective of the separatists, see **yadocent**, “Luganskaia Narodnaia Respublika. Khronologiiia”, *LiveJournal*, 27 June 2014, <http://yadocent.livejournal.com/600059.html>.

18 Voluminous material on this is available here: “Opium dlia naroda ili tserkov’ s privkusom DNR”, *shtrikh-code*, 31 July 2014, <http://mskod.com/opium-dlya-naroda-ili-tserkov-v-slavyanske-s-privkusom-dnr/>; and “Evidence Grows of Orthodox Clergy’s Aiding Ukraine Rebels”, *New York Times*, 6 September 2014. Vitalii Veselyi maintained close contacts with airborne forces’ veterans’ organisations, to which he belonged before becoming a priest. On these links, and for images showing Vitalii Veselyi demonstrating his swordmanship skills during the celebrations for Airborne Forces Day in Sloviansk on 2 August 2013, see “Den’ VDV. Slaviansk 2013”, *Slaviansk Svobodnyi Forum*, 9 August 2013, <http://torum.org/index.php?topic=7091.0> and http://torum.org/index.php?PH_PSESSID=ff045aab85373a047b9135600de6db89&topic=7091.15. For examples of his nationalistic verse, see: **otets_gennadiy**, “Stikhi iz Slavianska”, *Dnevnik Protoiereia Gennadiia Belovolova*, 26 August 2014, <http://otets-gennadiy.livejournal.com/181659.html>. In July 2013 Vitalii Veselyi ran a youth camp in Sloviansk featuring paintball (including imitation mines), and training in hand-to-hand combat, fighting with knives, and shooting air rifles. For images, see “Yunye prikhozhanе khramov Slavianskogo raiona otdokhnuli v palatochnom lagere vozle Sviatogorskoї Lavry”, *Gorlovskaiа i Slavianskaiа yeparkhiа, Moskovskii Patriarkhat – Ukrainskaiа Pravoslavnaia Tserkov’* official website, 20 July 2013, <http://gorlovka-eparhia.com.ua/yunye-prihozhane-hramov-slavyanskogo-rayona-otdokhnuli-v-pravoslavnom-palatochnom-lagere-vozle-svyatogorskoy-lavry/#>.

Ministry's Department for Mobilization—a low-ranking post but one that is well-suited to his skills and experience as a “rent-a-crowd” showman. In September he was forced to flee to Moscow. Upon attempting to return to the region in October, in hope of taking part in elections for the head of the “republic”, his car came under fire not far from the border, and Gubarev himself was wounded and evacuated to Russia. The only representative of this first and quite small wave of ideological separatists to occupy a position of power in the newly formed republics is Andrei Purgin, who currently heads up the DNR Supreme Council.

The third major group of fighters who took part in the first phase of the “Donbass revolution” in April 2014 comprised special forces (*spetsnaz*) and GRU and FSB officers (as opposed, that is, to the undercover agents and residents of these same agencies mentioned above). Some of them took part personally in the storming of administrative buildings, while others provided technical and military support to the occupiers.¹⁹ It was members of this group that were responsible for the first two Ukrainian helicopters shot down over Sloviansk on 2 May using MANPADs (surface-to-air defense missiles) manufactured by Russia.²⁰

Once some of the airborne forces and *spetsnaz* troops killed in action could be identified, it became clear that April 2014 had not been the first time that they had visited Ukraine undercover, posing as Ukrainian citizens. Some of them had even posted photos of themselves wearing the uniform of the Ukrainian special police

19 See for example a detailed interview with the former head of the SBU for the Luhansk region: Nataliia Dvali, “Eks-nachal'nik Luganskoi SBU Petrulevich: Terroristicheskie gruppy GRU Rossii uzhe v Kieve i zhdut signala”, *Gordon.ua*, 2 July 2014, <http://gordonua.com/publications/Petrulevich-Terroristicheskie-gruppy-GRU-Rossii-uzhe-v-Kieve-i-zhdut-signala-29825.html>.

20 For a detailed discussion of the presence of *spetsnaz* commandos from Riazan' in Sloviansk, see Kanygin, “Bes, Fiks, Roman”. For more on the shooting down of the helicopter, which clearly points to the involvement of trained soldiers, see an interview with Russia's leading civil military expert, Pavel Felgenhauer: “Zhurnal'ist Pavel Fel'gengauer: ispol'zovanie PZRK dokazyvaet, chto boevoe yadro v Slavianske—eto rossiiskii spetsnaz”, *Dozhd'*, 2 May 2014, http://tvrain.ru/articles/zhurnal'ist_pavel_felgengauer_ispolzovanie_pzrk_dokazyvaet_ch_to_boevoe_jadro_v_slavjanske_eto_rossijskij_spetsnaz-367872/.

force *Berkut* on their social network pages. This would suggest that they may already have been operating in Ukraine from late 2013, and opens up the possibility that they may even have been involved in the shooting of the demonstrators on Maidan; certainly, they played a role in the occupation of Crimea.²¹ On the whole this tactic of initiating and fueling an armed “popular uprising” is part of the covert “hybrid warfare” identified by the General Staff of the Russian army as a key priority, since at least early 2013.²² This strategy was framed as a response to the presumed role of the USA in the “color revolutions”. As far back as spring 2013, the Ministry of Defense was setting up units for special operations that were primarily to be carried out in neighboring countries.²³

The fourth group to be involved in the uprising in eastern Ukraine as early as in April 2014 comprised ideologically motivated Russian nationalists who, crucially, were also veterans of various wars and who had been mobilized during the events in Crimea. The best-known figure in this group is the retired FSB colonel Igor’ Girkin from Moscow, known as “Strelkov”, a historical reenactment enthusiast with a particular passion for the 1918–20 Civil War period. Self-styled successor to a White General, he came to Ukraine accompanied by Cossacks from the radical right-wing organization *Volch’ia sotnia* (the “Wolves’ Company”—a title that also has a

21 Particular attention has been paid to the case of Nikolai Kozlov, who was deployed in Crimea and later seriously wounded in the Donbass region: “Zabludivshiesia’ desantniki yeshche v Krymu, v forme ‘Berkuta’, ubivali ukraintsev”, *Inforesist.org*, 3 September 2014, <http://inforesist.org/zabludivshiesya-desantniki-eshhe-v-krymu-v-forme-berkuta-ubivali-ukraintsev-foto/>. See also the information on the case of Davran Muratov from the 31st Ul’ianovsk airborne forces division; Ruslan Leviev, “Pogibshii Davran Muratov iz Ul’ianovskoi 31-oi tozhe pereodevalsia v Berkut”, 5 September 2014, <https://twitter.com/RuslanLeviev/status/507882435426541568>.

22 This follows from the lecture by the Chief of General Staff Valerii Gerasimov delivered in January 2013 at a symposium at the Academy of Military Sciences and published in August 2014; cited Leonid Bershidskii, “Kremlevskaia kartina mira”, *Novoe vremia*, 2 September 2014, <http://nvua.net/opinion/bershidsky/Dlya-Rossii-mir-lish-teatr-voennyh-deystviy-10120.html>.

23 Russian television even produced an exclusive report on this: “Novyi rossiiskii spetsnaz dlia zagranitsy”, *Vesti* 24, 30 April 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ign7no3tXxw.

connection to the Civil War period,²⁴ and also to a World War Two Nazi collaborationist Cossack unit) from the city of Belorechensk in the Krasnodar region.

The head of intelligence in Girkin's group, and later also DNR deputy defense minister (i.e. Girkin's deputy) for intelligence was Sergei Petrovskii, described in a series of propaganda clips showcasing "DNR volunteers" as a "GRU colonel". Judging by his accent, Petrovskii is a native of the Donbass region.²⁵

The most numerous subgroup amongst the nationalists were the Cossacks, operating primarily under the command of Ataman Nikolai Kozitsyn. Kozitsyn is both a Russian citizen and a native of the Donbass region. In the pre-perestroika era he worked as a guard at one of the region's prison colonies, and later became a prominent figure within the Cossack movement in Russia. The Cossacks played a key role in the seizure of cities in the Luhansk region near to the Russian border, and claimed the city of Antratsit as their Cossack "capital".²⁶

After seizing the administrative buildings, the fighters were also able to add a number of civilians to their ranks by distributing

24 Subdivisions of Cossacks fighting for the White cause during the Civil War also fought under the name "Wolves' Company". One member of today's "Wolves' Company", known by his pseudonym, "Babai", has become the "media face" of the Sloviansk militia thanks to his photogenic flowing beard, exotic Astrakhan hat and willingness to talk to journalists. By his own account, "Babai" has served a prison sentence for grievous bodily harm involving a stabbing during a burglary. By contrast, his friend, the 39-year-old "Wolves' Company" commander Yevgenii Ponomarev ("Dingo") has served in the *spetsnaz*, is a veteran of conflicts in Tajikistan and Chechnya and most likely served prior to 2010 in "Typhoon", a special police unit for putting down prison riots in St Petersburg. See further Mitrokhin, "Transnationale Provokation".

25 **etoonda**, "Legenda Donbassa 'Khmuryi' (Plokhoi soldat)", *Livejournal*, 19 September 2014, <http://etoonda.livejournal.com/704235.html>.

26 It was members of the Don Cossack Host who seized control of the city of Antratsit in the Luhansk region in early May 2014. After the storming of the Antratsit municipal administration, the Cossacks are said to have flown the flag of the Civil War-era Don Republic over the building; "Kolonna russkikh kazakov prorvalas' na Yugo-Vostok Ukrainy na pomoshch' mestnym opolchentsam", *Aktual'no*, 6 May 2014, <http://aktualno.ru/view2/49542>. The Russian Cossack forces operating in Ukraine likewise include many veterans of the Chechen and Afghan wars, as well as neo-Nazis and criminal elements.

weapons from the stocks taken from the Ukrainian militia and army to all of those who declared themselves willing to join the fight. Several thousand civilians were recruited and armed in this way. Their motives included a long-standing hatred for Ukraine²⁷ and, in the case of veterans, the memory of the “good old days” of the battles in Afghanistan or Chechnya. Their goals included boosting the profile and position of the Donbass region and implementing a redistribution of oligarchs’ assets among the “ordinary people”. Of course the prospect of free access to weapons and the opportunity to steal and plunder with impunity also had the unintended effect of attracting many criminal elements.

The journal *Ekspert’s* correspondent Marina Akhmedova sketches out in one of her feature stories a portrait of what seems to me to be a typical junior commander of the fighters. Identifying ethnically as a “Don Cossack”, her subject, a man by the name of Miron, lives in the city of Makeevka in the Donetsk region. Miron graduated from a military academy in Perm’, fought in Karabakh, and later moved to Ukraine. When he failed to find work in the army there, he began working in the mines, something that he considers a downward move socially. He is clearly unhappy about the fact that the authorities treat “teenagers” from the Maidan as patriots of Ukraine, while disregarding tax-payers and decorated military servicemen like himself (although at the same time, he also supports annexing Ukraine to Russia). He is embroiled in a generational conflict with his daughter, a university student who supports the Maidan. And despite all this, he remains unable to connect his own actions as a fighter to the fact that his own mine has now been destroyed (by Ukrainian forces, during the storming of the city).²⁸

27 By the mid-2000s the presence of a young generation of Russian-speakers who have grown up deeply alienated from and hostile towards the surrounding society and state had become a serious problem not only in Ukraine but also elsewhere in post-Soviet space. The mass disorders in Tallinn in 2007 and the current Ukrainian events demonstrate that this is a force with vast destructive potential, and one that is especially vulnerable to manipulation by the current Russian regime with the help of Russian television; see further Mitrokhin, “Transnationale Provokation”.

28 Marina Akhmedova, “Vy dlia nas—rodnye”, *Ekspert.ru*, 27 November 2014, http://expert.ru/russian_reporter/2014/46/vyi-dlya-nas--rodnyie/.

Phase 2: Fanatics, Adventurers, Soldiers

The second phase of armed conflict started in mid-May 2014. At this point, the Ukrainian army recovered from its initial collapse and moved to act against the pro-Russian fighters. It was at this point that it became apparent that the latter had much less real support in the region, and that their influence was confined to much smaller areas than some dreamers in the Kremlin had hoped. The project for a “New Russia” (Novorossiiia) comprising the entirety of eastern and southern Ukraine, the brainchild of “experts” from Konstantin Zatulin’s Institute for CIS Countries in Moscow, had already clearly failed by the end of April.²⁹ The failed anti-Ukrainian putsch in Odessa on 2 May 2014 marked the definitive end of the Novorossiiia project.³⁰

Even in the Donbass region, the influence of the hastily thrown together people’s republics over parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions was limited. Effectively the pro-Russian fighters only controlled the urban agglomerations which stretched over 200 kilometers from Donetsk in the south to Krasnodon in the north, together with three industrial towns outside of this zone: Mariupol’ in the south of the Donetsk region, and Sloviansk and Kramatorsk in the north. The northern half of the Luhansk region and some districts in the region’s southeast, together with the western and southern parts of the Donetsk region, including the outlying suburbs of Donetsk itself, did not support the calls to occupy the administrative buildings. These areas remained under the control of the government in Kiev.

29 From March 2014 onwards, maps of “New Russia” were repeatedly displayed in the Russian media. These maps frequently showed the following eight regions of Ukraine—the Luhansk, Donetsk, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, Kherson and Odessa oblasts. Crimea was sometimes shown as part of “old” Russia and sometimes part of “New Russia”. On some maps, Transnistria or even the entire region of Moldova was also labeled part of “New Russia”. For more information on the influence of the Institute for CIS Countries (Diaspora and Integration Institute), see Mitrokhin, “Transnationale Provokation”: 161–163.

30 This was preceded by normalization of the situation in Kharkiv, which likewise showed up the unviability of the “Novorossiiia” project.

Moreover, even in the regions controlled by the pro-Russian fighters, the population did not behave as expected of them. Across the entire regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, only roughly a third of the population supported the idea of becoming part of Russia; another third were satisfied with autonomy for the Donbass region; and a third were in favor of maintaining the status quo.³¹ In the regions controlled by the pro-Russian fighters, support for becoming part of Russia was certainly higher, in the cities in particular. Evidence of this was provided not least by the fact that in the first phase of the conflict some groups of residents had set groups of Ukrainian tanks against the pro-Russian fighters. Only very few, however, were willing to go into battle for their convictions and sit in the trenches under artillery fire.³²

But even in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk the initial burst of euphoria and war enthusiasm was shortlived, and as early as 18 May the leader of the fighters, Igor' Girkin, appealed to the "citizens of the People's Republic" in desperation, complaining of an acute shortage of military manpower and calling on men and women to join his troops.³³

By this point, structures had already been put in place in Russia enabling the recruitment and transportation of soldiers willing to go to Ukraine to fight for the "Russian world". Particularly important here was the network of military conscription offices or *voenkomaty*, which were able to track down veterans of the wars in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Georgia, many of them then living in highly straitened circumstances.³⁴ The ideal candidate was a

31 According to the results of a survey carried out by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KMIS); Inna Vedernikova et al, "Yugo-Vostok: vetv' dreva nashego", *Gazeta.za.ua*, 18 April 2014, http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/yugo-vostok-vetv-dreva-nashego_.html.

32 For more information on the fighters' motives see also: Yevgeniia Suprycheva, "Korrespondent 'KP' dvoe sutok provela v plenu v Slavianske", *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 22 April 2014, <http://kp.ua/politics/449329-korrespondent-kp-dvoe-sutok-provela-v-plenu-v-slavianske>.

33 "Obrashchenie Igoria Strelkova 17 maia 2014 g.", *Russkii obozrevatel'*, 18 May 2014, www.rus-obr.ru/media/31425.

34 It should be noted that veterans of these wars are fighting on both sides of the conflict in Ukraine. Veterans of Afghanistan took an active part in the defense of the Maidan, for example.

seasoned and battle-hardened veteran who was now eking out a living as a security guard, in construction or as a driver, preferably with debts and/or an unhappy home life; or alternatively, a young man who had recently completed his military service and was experiencing difficulty in re-adjusting and finding a niche in the civilian world.³⁵ They were promised remuneration far exceeding their current incomes.³⁶ These were the kind of men who now began to operate the heavy weaponry with which Russia began supplying the fighters from early June, once it became clear that Girkin's men would not be capable of stopping the Ukrainian army's tanks and artillery, even with the surface-to-air and anti-tank missiles brought over from Russia in April.

The second major group to join the pro-Russian forces in this second phase comprised politicized "volunteers" who were attracted by the flame of the stubborn resistance in Sloviansk and the reports of victorious battles on social networks. The whole gamut of neo-

35 This category has its own literary chronicler, Pavel Ziabkin (born 1967), who was killed in the fighting for Donetsk airport on 26 May 2014. Here is how Ziabkin narrates his own biography: "I was born and grew up in Voronezh. Law degree. From May '95 through April '96 and July 2000 through January 2001 I served as a contract soldier in Chechnya (motorized infantry). Besides that I also did military service in '85-'87 near Moscow and in the Federal Border Service Border Troops under contract in '97-'98, back in Voronezh. I went through a ton of career changes: from investigator for the procurator's office to debt collector to stevedore"; "Ziabkin Pavel Vladimirovich", *Art of War*, http://artofwar.ru/editors/z/zjabkin_p_w/about.shtml. Numerous war stories and essays by Ziabkin are available at the *Art of War* site: http://artofwar.ru/editors/z/zjabkin_p_w/. For a report on another similar case, see: Yelena Kostiuhenko, "Vash muzh dobrovol'no poshel na obstrel", *Novaia gazeta*, no. 65, 18 June 2014, www.novayagazeta.ru/inquests/64052.html.

36 For example, according to one volunteer from Yekaterinburg region, a veteran of the Chechen conflict, representatives of the local communist party branch and private entrepreneurs supporting the recruitment drive promised the volunteers US\$2500 a month. For comparison, the individual in question was earning US\$1300 a month at the time in his job as a car mechanic. The money that he was promised never materialized, however; see Igor' Pushkarev, "Kazhdyi den' tam gibnet po 50-200 chelovek", *Znak*, 4 December 2014, <http://znak.com/moscow/articles/04-12-19-47/103315.html>.

imperialist organizations, from the “Limonovtsy”³⁷ and publicist Sergei Kurginian’s neo-Stalinist sect *Sut’ vremeni* (The Essence of Time) through to the neo-Nazi organization *Russkoe natsional’noe yedinstvo* (Russian National Unity, RNE), formerly the largest neo-Nazi group in the country but now divided into several subgroups;³⁸ and the circle around the known anti-Semite and former GRU officer Vladimir Kvachkov, prosecuted for an assassination attempt against Anatolii Chubais in 2005 and imprisoned on charges of planning an armed rebellion in 2013;³⁹ on to the “Eurasianists” working with Aleksandr Dugin; the White historical re-enactment enthusiasts;⁴⁰ and of course, the Cossacks—all of these groups now

37 That is, members of Eduard Limonov’s banned “National Bolshevik Party” (NPB), who were already involved in the conquest of Crimea in early March 2014. For a report on two members of the NPB from Latvia, where the party has a large number of supporters, who traveled to Ukraine, see: “Na storone separatistov voiuut byvschie zhiteli Ludzy”, *LSM.lv*, 1 September 2014, www.lsm.lv/ru/statja/obschestvo/novosti/na-storone-separatistov-voyuyut-bi-vshie-zhiteli-ludzi.a96745/. In summer 2014, the NPB divided over the issue of whether the approach taken by the Kremlin towards Ukraine should be supported; “Limonovtsy” razuverilis’ v svoem vozhdze”, *Novyi region*, 20 March 2014, http://nr2.com.ua/News/Ukraine_and_Europe/%C2%ABlimonovtsy%C2%BB-razuverilis-v-svoem-vozhdze-68573.html. A significant portion of the party clearly argued against supporting Russian policy on Ukraine and even organized a whole range of protests in several regions of Russia at which—following the example of the Donbass region—more autonomy for these regions was demanded; “Sibiriaki gotovy borot’sia za avtonomiiu ot Moskvu”, *Glavnoe.ua*, 28 July 2014, <http://glavnoe.ua/news/n185456>.

38 In the Donbass region, the RNE organized the small but highly effective group *Russkaia pravoslavnaia armia* (Russian Orthodox army), which was *de facto* under the control of RNE member Pavel Gubarev, by Gubarev’s own account.

39 For more information on Kvachkov, see Mitrokhin, “Transnationale Provokation”: 169–170, n. 14.

40 These are the people who had staged re-enactments of historical battles from the 1918–20 Civil War as professionals or in their free time and who are members of the White Movement. Head of the political department of the Ministry of Defense of the Donetsk People’s Republic, in other words Head of Military Propaganda, was Igor’ Ivanov, a historian of the White Movement and Chair of the Russian Department of the *Russkii obshchevoinskii soiuz* (Russian All-Military Union, ROVS), an organization founded by émigré White Army officers. The ROVS lost significance after 1945 but has undergone a revival among a small group of supporters in Russia since the 1990s; see Ivanov’s website, “Iz put. Personal’naia stranitsa Igoria Borisovicha Ivanova”, <http://izput.narod.ru/>.

called upon their members to come to the Donbass region to fight and to recruit others sympathetic to the cause. The list of the members of these organizations killed in the fighting in eastern Ukraine includes: Aleksandr Stefanovskii, a communist-Kurginian supporter from Perm';⁴¹ Il'ia Gur'ev, a *Natsbol* from Tol'iatti;⁴² Konstantin Rusakov, a former member of the Altai regional parliament with connections to the émigré organization *Narodno-trudovoi Soiuz*;⁴³ nationalists from St. Petersburg;⁴⁴ and Don and Kuban Cossacks. In addition to the volunteers who came to Ukraine from Russia in the name of the "Russian Cause", the fighting also attracted members of other, non-Russian ethnicities with combat experience—predominantly Chechens and Ossetians—to come to serve (and earn money) in the Donbass region as soldiers.⁴⁵ But the Russian Federation was not the only source of fighters. Russian nationalists, supporters of the "Russian World" project and mercenary adventurers traveled to the Donbass region from as far afield as Belarus, Latvia, Serbia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany and even Israel.⁴⁶

41 Sviatoslav Ivanov, "Mertyvi anarkhist", *Russkaia planeta*, 18 August 2014, http://perm.rusplt.ru/index/kak_horonili_permskogo_opolchenca_pogibshego_pod_luganskom-12118.html.

42 Aleksandr Averin, "Pod Luganskom pogib natsbol iz Tol'iatti Il'ia Gur'ev", *LiveJournal*, 16 August 2014, <http://alaverin.livejournal.com/657902.html>.

43 "Proshchanie s pogibshimi na vostoke Ukrainy zhiteliami Altaiskogo kraia proidet 4 sentiabria", *Bankfaks.ru*, 4 September 2014, www.bankfax.ru/news/94141/.

44 "Dva russkikh natsionalista iz Sankt-Peterburga ubity pod Slavianskom", *Voronz.in.ua*, 8 July 2014, <http://voronz.in.ua/recomend/8-7-14-20802>.

45 See for example a detailed account on the Chechen contingent: Vadim Braidov, "Russkaia pravoslavnaia armiia' ukraintsev i chechentsev", *Profil*, 12 June 2014, www.profile.ru/eks-sssr/item/82980-russkaya-pravoslavnaya-armiya-ukraintsev-i-chechentsev.

46 On Belarusian volunteers see for example Aleksandr Yaroshevich, "Zachem belorusy voiuut v Ukraine", *Naviny.by*, 7 July 2014, http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2014/07/07/ic_articles_116_185966/. The most famous case of a foreign volunteer is a woman who goes by the name of Margarete Seidler. Seidler, who speaks with a German accent, claims to be an Orthodox nun from Germany and works for the DNR Press Office; "Nemetskaia monakhinia namerena mstit' ukrainskim natsistam", *S-narodom.ru*, 11 September 2014, <http://s-narodom.ru/yuogovostok/don/2376-nemeckaya-monahinya-namerena-mstit-ukrainski-m-nacistam.html>. Russian Germans from Germany also appear to have joined

Evidently the majority of the volunteers initially traveled to the Rostov region, where an entire network of camps was set up to receive and accommodate them. Once they had been vetted by the FSB, the prospective fighters then underwent a brief period of training in another camp in the municipal area of Rostov, before ultimately being assembled at military premises owned by the Ministry of Defense to be divided into groups earmarked for transport to Ukraine. Here they were also equipped with weapons and ammunition that had been seized in Crimea. All of the volunteers were promised large sums of money and generous compensation in the event that they were wounded. They were required to surrender all of their personal documents and mobile phones before setting off for Ukraine.⁴⁷

The commanders from Russia used the influx of volunteers to top up their troops. The reinforcements also enabled them to move to combat the rapidly deteriorating reputation enjoyed by the pro-Russian fighters, who were increasingly being seen by the population as criminals. On 24 May, Girkin (Strelkov) announced that two commanders in his unit had been shot as marauders, and on 9 June, he arrested the “People’s Mayor” of Sloviansk, Viacheslav Ponomarev—the man who had previously officially invited Girkin and his troops to come to defend the city.⁴⁸

Events followed a similar trajectory in Donetsk. A *de facto* coup took place there on 15-16 May, when the local political activists who were formally (with strong support from their Russian backers) in charge of the Donetsk People’s Republic were ousted from power. A Russian nationalist, Moscow political technologist Aleksandr Borodai, now became prime minister. Previously Borodai had been responsible only for coordinating and liaising between various

the fighters in the Donbass region; “Pozyvnoi ‘Shtirlits’: dobrovolets iz Germanii priekhal pomogat’ opolcheniiu Donbassa”, *RT na russkom*, 25 July 2014, <http://russian.rt.com/article/42497#ixzz38VFkJWx>.

47 By way of an example, see the interviews with a volunteer and a member of a special unit of the Ministry of Defense; Kostuchenko, “Armiia i dobrovol'tsy”.

48 Mikhail Vernyi, “Strelkov snial ‘narodnogo mera’ Slavianska Viacheslava Ponomareva”, *MK.ru*, 10 June 2014, www.mk.ru/politics/2014/06/10/arestovan-narodnyy-mer-slavyanska-vyacheslav-ponomarev.html.

groups of fighters and their Moscow backers. His old acquaintance Girkin now became Minister of Defense, although he remained in Sloviansk. On 29 May, the “Vostok” battalion made up primarily of volunteers from Russia drove the criminal groups out of the regional administration buildings that they had occupied since the storming by the pro-Russian fighters in early April.⁴⁹ In so doing, Borodai effectively seized power over Donetsk, although many pro-Russian groups outside of the city refused to recognize this. The conflict reflected the fact that these groups were now ever more frequently being viewed as criminal gangs—even by the leadership of the People’s Republic itself.

A similar sequence of events was repeated in Luhansk, where Moscow political technologist Marat Bashirov was named Prime Minister of the People’s Republic on 3 July. Prior to this, Bashirov, who had started his career as an employee of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, had no known links to Ukraine.⁵⁰

The influx of volunteers and *voenkomat* recruits was very high in May and July but this flow apparently dried up quite abruptly in early August. There were several reasons for this. One was the obvious military failure against the strengthened Ukrainian army. A further reason was the fact that, at this point, it seemed evident that the Russian leadership had abandoned the “project”—the People’s Republics had not been recognized following the referendum in April, and a large number of the special commandos had been withdrawn.⁵¹

49 The cause of this was the looting of a shop belonging to the wholesale chain Metro, “Batal'on 'Vostok' nachal zachiashchat' zdanie Donetskoï OGA ot storonnikov DNR”, *Munitsipal'naia gazeta* (Donetsk), 29 May 2014, <http://mungaz.net/main/13032-batalon-vostok-nachal-zachischat-zdanie-doneckoy-oga-ot-storonnikov-dnr.html>.

50 **yadocent**, “Otstavka Pravitel'stva LNR”, *LiveJournal*, 4 July 2014, <http://yadocent.livejournal.com/603355.html>.

51 No large groups of Russian soldiers were observed in the Donbass region from early May to late July. None of the large number of Russian soldiers whose deaths were announced at the end of August and the beginning of September died between April and June 2014. However, there is information on the deaths of two soldiers (Armen Davoian, Aleksandr Voronov) who were part of the reconnaissance battalion of the 9th motorized infantry brigade based in

On the night of 4-5 July, Girkin and his group, which had swelled to 1500 men, left Sloviansk and Kramatorsk and gave up almost half of the territory previously controlled by the pro-Russian fighters in the Donetsk region. They withdrew from all of the rural districts—an action further indicating a lack of support from the Russian-speaking Ukrainians there. These developments sparked a crisis of confidence in Girkin as a military strategist and *de facto* leader of the “Russian Spring”.⁵²

The decline in the influx of new forces was also one of the reasons why many of the volunteers and mercenaries met with a nasty surprise when they tried to leave Ukraine again. Many of them had planned to leave once their summer holidays were over, and others became very keen to go home once they realized the extent to which their lives were in danger. But towards the end of July it became clear that returning to Russia would not be such a simple matter, since Girkin had ordered that measures be taken to keep them in Ukraine. Volunteers and mercenaries alike had been required to surrender their passports before being deployed to Ukraine. But now that they needed their passports in order to get back to Russia, they were told that their passports would only be returned by approval of their commanding officers. The latter, of course, had no desire to lose fighters with combat experience. Many of them also had no intention of paying out the large sums of money that the fighters had been promised.

As a result, by mid-August, there were around 20 to 25 thousand troops fighting on the side of the pro-Russian fighters in

Nizhnyi Novgorod and Dzerzhinsk and who died near Luhansk; see “Nashi soldaty. Grazhdanskoe rassledovanie”, *Dozhd*, <http://tvrain.ru/soldat/>.

52 One expression of this crisis was the widely disseminated rumors that the strength of the Ukrainian army was not the reason for the rapid withdrawal. This could apparently have been withstood, if not in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, then at least in the relatively big cities (for example, Druzhkovka and Konstantinovka) between these two cities and Donetsk. Rather, Girkin was said to have been motivated here by a desire to help Aleksandr Borodai who had lost the support of the “Vostok” battalion and was facing the threat of being ousted by the leader of the fighters in Gorlovka, Igor’ Bezler, who was in the process of trying to conquer the Donetsk regional Ministry of Internal Affairs building with his troops; **ruskom**, “Borodaevskaia ATO”, *LiveJournal*, 29 August 2014, <http://ruskom.livejournal.com/567981.html>.

the Donbass region. Of these, only 40-45 percent were “locals” from the Donbass region. The proportion of local fighters was definitely declining, and forced recruitment was already being used amongst the local population.⁵³ In July the vast majority of the male population of fighting age fled the cities controlled by the pro-Russian fighters, prompting repeated angry diatribes on the part of the desperate leaders and field commanders of “New Russia”.⁵⁴

53 According to the estimates of the Ukrainian military observer Dmitrii Tymchuk; “Protsent mestnykh boevikov sredi terroristov padaet—Tymchuk”, *Unian*, 20 August 2014, <http://www.unian.net/politics/953441-protsemt-mestnykh-boevikov-sredi-terroristov-padaet-tymchuk.html>. The estimates for the months of May to July vary significantly. What was certainly true, however, was that the number of fighters decreased considerably over this period. At the end of May, the DNR Minister of Information, Aleksandr Cherviakov spoke of 5,000 men who were fighting in the “People’s Army” and 15,000 further supporters. In late June, media close to the Kremlin spoke of a maximum of 12,000 fighters on the side of the “separatists”. On 20 June, the Ukrainian Secret Service SBU noted that there were 4,500 fighters; “Na Donbasse oruduiut okolo 4,5 tysiach boevikov,—SBU”, *Tsenzor.net.ua*, 20 June 2014, http://censor.net.ua/news/290778/na_donbasse_oruduyut_okolo_45_tysyach_boevikov_sbu. On 4 August, the Ukrainian Minister of Defense admitted that despite the losses there were still around 15,000 men fighting on the side of the “separatists”; “V Kieve poobeshchali skoruii pobedu nad opolcheniem”, *Lenta.ru*, 4 August 2014, <http://lenta.ru/news/2014/08/04/victory/>. On 19 August, the fighters themselves spoke of there being 19,000-23,000 men; “Shtab opolcheniia otsenil chislennost’ voisk Novorossii v 19–13 tys. chelovek”, *Vzgliad*, 19 August 2014, <http://vz.ru/news/2014/8/19/701132.html>. The Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs gave a similar number (15 to 20 thousand) at the end of August; “Na Donbasse seichas voiuut do 15-20 tysiach terroristov—Gerashchenko”, *TSN.ua*, 27 August 2014, <http://ru.tsn.ua/ukrayina/na-donbasse-seychas-voyuyut-do-15-20-tysyach-terroristov-geraschenko-383381.html>. The figures on the proportions of Russian citizens among the fighters are more disputed still. Estimates range from 90% fighters from the Donbass region to an absolute majority of fighters from Russia. One veteran of the Chechen conflict, a native of Cheliabinsk, who took part in the storming of Donetsk airport as a member of the spy defense unit of the “Donetsk People’s Republic”, spoke of a proportion of Russian citizens of 90%; cited Sergei Leonov, “Iz-za negramotnogo komandovaniia nas rastrelivaiut v upor!”, *URA.ru*, 1 October 2014, <http://ura.ru/content/chel/01-10-2014/articles/1036263086.html>. Having examined the available sources, I would conclude that the figures provided by Tymchuk appear to be the most realistic.

54 See for example the report by Nikolai Mokrousov, “Ya prinial reshenie narushit’ raspisku o nerazglashenii...””, *Znak*, 25 August 2014, <http://znak.com/moscow/articles/25-08-19-49/102823>. On the whole, if we estimate the number

Thus, a large number of soldiers with combat experience were now fighting on the side of the pro-Russian fighters. Many of them had formerly worked for the Soviet or Russian security services or special units under the command of men such as Girkin, Bezler, Ponomarev, Dremov, Arsenii Pavlov (aka “Motorola”) with experience of fighting in Chechnya or Afghanistan. From the start of July, immediately after the surrender of Sloviansk, the pro-Russian fighters began to receive new weapons and ammunition from Russia, including modern artillery and rocket launchers,⁵⁵ in addition to logistical and strategic support from military advisors, and this significantly changed the military situation.⁵⁶

On the Ukrainian side, it was predominantly reservists who had never been to war before who made up the dilapidated regular army. Even the troops belonging to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, now referred to as the “National Guard”, had no combat experience. This was even more the case when it came to the rapidly assembled volunteer battalions.⁵⁷

The Ukrainian troops were therefore very slow to take on the pro-Russian fighters. Nevertheless, they did manage to take the strategic initiative. In June and July, they very successfully put their

of fighters who were residents of the Donbass at 10 000 (counting the rear and losses), then this would mean that the pro-Russian fighters succeeded in attracting around 0.13% of the 7-million-strong population of the region. We might note here also that during the political crisis of March-April 2014, around 7000 people was the maximum turn-out achieved for any individual rally held under pro-separatist slogans in the region.

55 In addition, that is, to the small arms, ammunition and individual old tanks that were previously provided.

56 For a well-informed pro-Russian account see **colonelcassad**, “Nastuplenie khunty: Promezhutochnye itogi”, *Livejournal*, 12 July 2014, <http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/1661754.html>. On 14 June the Ukrainian military succeeded in seizing in the Donetsk region a damaged Grad rocket system belonging to the 18th motorized infantry brigade (unit no. 27777) (Chechnya), together with documentation. It had been part of a column of weapons technology that had shot up Ukrainian positions before evading pursuit; “Posle obstrela terroristy brosil rossiskii ‘Grad’”, *Censor.net.ua*, 14 June 2014, http://censor.net.ua/news/289913/posle_obstrela_terroristy_brosili_rossiyskiyi_grad_prinadlejaschiyi_18yi_gvardeyiskoyi_motostrelkovoyi.

57 Margarete Klein, Kristian Pester, “Kiev on the Offensive: the Military Dimension of the Conflict in Ukraine”, *SWP-Aktuell* 52, August 2014.

efforts into surrounding the pro-Russian groups at a distance and cutting off the supply lines to the cities in which they were holed up. The groups of Cossacks, who were comparatively numerous but lacking in resolve, tended to abandon their positions at the first sign of shelling.⁵⁸ The “Army of Donetsk and Luhansk” was also being eaten away from within by infighting between the various field commanders and units. In addition, some groups preferred robbing the local population to fighting the Ukrainian army.

Under these circumstances, even the new modern weaponry now being supplied by Russia failed to tip the balance in favor of the pro-Russian side.⁵⁹ In the first week of August, the Ukrainian army managed to create a siege all of the way around Donetsk and Luhansk—albeit in a circle which was not completely closed. Recapture of the area seemed to be inevitable. The Ukrainian army, which was under constant artillery and rocket fire from Russian territory, knew that it would not be able to close the entire border with Russia, thereby cutting off all of the opposing troops from their supply line. They therefore concentrated on bringing the most important transport routes for heavy arms and ammunition within the Donbass region under control. Despite heavy losses, they succeeded almost completely in achieving this.⁶⁰ On 9 August, Ukrainian units interrupted the final major transport route from

58 For more information on the “separatists” disappointment with the Cossacks, see: Yurii Zhil'tsov, “Igor' Strelkov: Kazaki Kozitsina sbezhali s fronta v polnom sostave”, *Real'naia politika*, 6 June 2014, <http://realpolitic.ru/mnenie/igor-strelkov-kazaki-kozicina-sbezhali-s-fronta-v-polnom-sostave-4406/>.

59 This was documented very carefully by one of the best-informed military observers on the side of the separatists: **colonelcassad**, “Nastuplenie khunty: Promezhutochnye itogi”, *LiveJournal*, 12 July 2014, <http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/1661754.html>.

60 The Ukrainian army suffered losses in particular when a large unit was surrounded in late July. This was the unit that had previously cut off the Donetsk region and parts of the Luhansk region from Russia. Initially they were heavily shelled from Russia with artillery and Grad rockets under the pretext of ending a supposed targeted bombardment of Russian territory—in fact only isolated misdirected grenades landed in Russia. Large groups of pro-Russian fighters then lost the cities they had held for the first time during the entire armed conflict, and so they switched to the heavy artillery they had just received from Russia and surrounded the troops from Kiev.

Donetsk into the Luhansk region (and therefore to Russia), and even conquered part of the city of Krasnyi Luch. However, they were fought back after a number of hours. But before this happened, the leaders of the pro-Russian fighters and the FSB agents positioned in the Donbass region had communicated the complete surrounding of the pro-Russian fighters to Moscow and requested urgent support.⁶¹ This marked the start of the third phase of violent seizure of power in the Donbass region.

Phase 3: Entry of the Army

Between 7 and 14 August, once the Ukrainian army appeared to have succeeded in cutting off the pro-Russian fighters' supply lines completely at the end of the first week of August 2014, the situation changed dramatically. On the one hand, the political leadership of both "People's Republics" changed simultaneously. In just a week, the two Muscovites Borodai and Girkin, Bolotov (from the Luhansk region) and a number of less important figures all resigned. They were now replaced by "respected" field commanders holding Ukrainian citizenship. But this change seems to have been made merely for propaganda purposes. It would appear that, unlike their predecessors, the new leaders no longer had any real influence or power. In the city of Krasnodon, near to the border with Russia in the Luhansk region, a type of "coordination center" had now been set up, and it was apparently here that the movements of fighter detachments began to be coordinated with those of the regular Russian troops who were preparing for the impending attack.⁶²

An analysis of the lists of Russian citizens killed in the Donbass that have been compiled via the independent public

61 A telephone conversation between an FSB agent with the code name "Trifon" (from the groups created in Crimea under Girkin and Zdriliuk) recorded by the Ukrainian Secret Service conveys a sense of how panicked the FSB agents were at the time; "FSB sobiraetsia vyvodit' svoikh liudei iz Donbassa (audiozapis)", *Fokus.ua*, 15 August 2014, <http://fokus.ua/country/312424/>.

62 **colonelcassad**, "Situatsiia pod Krasnodonom", *LiveJournal*, 15 August 2014, <http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/173183.html>.

campaigns aimed at gathering information on this subject enables us to obtain a basic (albeit still quite rough) picture of the dynamic of the Russian military participation in the conflict. Up until 9 August, only isolated cases of the involvement of Russian regular troops have been established. Thus, for example, Armen Davoian and Aleksandr Voronov from the reconnaissance battalion of the 9th Motorized Rifle Brigade (Nizhnyi Novgorod/Dzerzhinsk) were killed near Luhansk at some point in the first half of July.⁶³ On 11 July, Sergei Volkov from the 76th Guards Air Assault Division (Pskov) was killed, seemingly in Ukraine. His grave was discovered by journalists one and a half months later at the now sadly notorious cemetery in the village of Vybuty, 17 km from Pskov.⁶⁴

From 9 August onwards Russian soldiers began to be killed on Ukrainian territory practically on a daily basis, and in large groups. The 18th Motorized Brigade based in Chechnya suffered especially badly. Nine men from this brigade, mostly reconnaissance soldiers and predominantly members of North Caucasian nationalities, were killed on 9 and 11 August, supposedly at a training ground in Rostov region.⁶⁵

On 12 August Marsel' Araptanov, a professional soldier serving with the 17th Motorized Brigade (also based in Chechnya), was killed.⁶⁶ On 13 August at least three additional soldiers serving under contract in the 18th Motorized Brigade were killed a day after they entered Ukrainian territory. These were Anton Tumanov,

63 "Nashi soldaty", <http://tvrain.ru/soldat/>.

64 Nina Petlianova, "Desant", *Novaia gazeta*, no. 95, 27 August 2014, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/64975.html?p=4>.

65 This list was compiled by members of the RF Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society; "Zherty neob"iavlennoi voiny", *Civitas. Vestnik grazhdanskogo obshchestva*, 3 September 2014, <http://vestnikcivitas.ru/news/3509>. Later the Defense Ministry deigned to pay out official compensation for these "deaths in the course of training". The 18th Motorized Brigade was frequently mentioned in connection with Ukraine from March 2014 onwards.

66 "Nashi soldaty", <http://tvrain.ru/soldat/>; Natal'ia Kuznetsova, "Telo bylo tseloe, golova na meste", *Russkaia planeta Ufa*, 30 August 2014, <http://ufa.rusplt.ru/index/Kak-na-samom-dele-pogib-Marsel-Araptanov-12442.html>.

Robert Arutiunian and Rustam Gusamov.⁶⁷ There are conflicting data on the location and number of these deaths. According to his family, Rustam Gusamov was killed near Luhansk together with 26 fellow servicemen. According to Tumanov's relatives and fellow servicemen, who were questioned at length by *Novaia gazeta* correspondents, Tumanov and Arutiunian were among 120 men killed in Snizhne, a town that was strategically significant for breaking through the Ukrainian encirclement. They had been dispatched on the Russian side of the border on 11 July and had twice crossed the border into Ukraine disguised as "people's militia", once in late July and once in early August. In the last message that Anton Tumanov's family received from him on 11 August, he said that he had been deployed to Ukraine for two months "to help the people's militia".

On 16-19 August major casualties (several dozen deaths) were suffered by a company from the 104th regiment of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division (Pskov). Ukrainian troops seized this unit's car near Luhansk together with various personal documents belonging to paratroopers.⁶⁸ It was the news of these deaths that sparked the beginning of sustained journalistic investigations in Russia. Despite these losses, in the course of a week, from 9-16 August, Russian troops beat the Ukrainian army back and reopened the supply lines to Donetsk.⁶⁹

On 16 August, the new "Prime Minister of the DNR", Aleksandr Zakharchenko—the former head of the Donetsk "Oplot" "fight club", presented as a "respected field commander"—openly

67 Racheva, "'Drugoi raboty-to net'"; and Andrei Mal'gin, "Gruz-200 prishel v Novosibirsk", *LiveJournal*, 7 September 2014, <http://avmalgin.livejournal.com/4868051.html>.

68 "Nashi soldaty", <http://tvrain.ru/soldat/>; Petlianova, "Desant";

69 A regular soldier from the 15th peacebuilding brigade (stationed in Samara) posted photos on social networks proving that in August he was still stationed on the Russian side of the border with Ukraine but in September was with men from his unit and their tank, from which the identification marks had been removed, on the "separatists" side as part of the "Vitiiaz" formation which was controlling the route from Krasnodon to Luhansk; "V sotssetiakh dokazali, chto 15-ia mirotvorcheskaia brigada RF pereodelas' v terroristov 'LNR'", *Obozrevatel'*, 19 September 2014, <http://obozrevatel.com/crime/98647-v-sotssetyah-dokazali-chto-15-ya-mirotvorcheskaya-brigada-rf-prosto-pereodelas-v-terroristov-lnr.htm>.

declared that his forces had received help from Russia in the form of 150 tanks, and that over the course of four months 1,200 men had received military training in Russia.⁷⁰ In this press conference, Zakharchenko also announced that there were plans for these new troops to attack Novoazovsk—an event that duly came to pass on 25 August. It is now clear that this attack was carried out by Russian troops. Judging from the lists of those killed and captured, these were mostly paratroopers from Ul'ianovsk (31st Guards Airborne Brigade) and Kostroma (98th Division).⁷¹ There is some evidence that the real goal of the humanitarian convoys from Russia was to supply these units with petrol and food. Certainly it is the case that the convoys organized by the Ministry of Defense in Moscow reached the Donbass region at precisely the point at which the attack was carried out.

The Ukrainian army was not prepared for an invasion of this type. It was unable to mobilize sufficient soldiers and provide sufficient equipment, weapons and ammunition to secure the borders of the liberated territory.⁷² A relatively small number of soldiers who marched in from Russia in “tactical battalion groups”—

70 “Glava boevikov A. Zakharchenko o pomoshchi iz RF”, www.youtube.com/watch?v=izfkNbzNAbk.

71 “Nashi soldaty”, <http://tvrain.ru/soldat/>. In addition, according to a list compiled by “Otkrytaia Rossiia”, military servicemen were killed from the 137th regiment of the 106th Airborne Division (Riazan’) (Sergei Andriianov has not made contact with his family since 19 August; see Ivan Zhilin, “On otdal svoju zhizn’, a yego privezli vot tak...”, *Novaia gazeta*, 24 November 2014, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/66219.html>); the 6th Separate Tank Brigade (Mulino, Volodarskii district, Nizhnyi Novgorod region) (Vladislav Barakov, killed 24 August), and others; “Otkrytaia Rossiia ustanavlivaet lichnosti pogibshikh iz spiska ‘Gruz-200’”, *Otkrytaia Rossiia*, 26 January 2015, <https://openrussia.org/post/view/1772/>. Another case that has received wide publicity is that of the group of military servicemen from the 98th Airborne Division from Kostroma, who gave detailed interviews on Ukrainian television about their role in the offensive.

72 **Svargaman**, “Mobilizatsiia na Ukraine iuil’ 2014”, *Voprosik*, 28 July 2014, <http://voprosik.net/mobilizaciya-na-ukraine-iyul-2014/>. There was particularly strong criticism of the fact that in summer 2014 the Ministry of Defense did not conclude any contracts with the most important tank manufacturer, the Malyshev factory in Kharkiv; “Ukroboronprom’ uvolil rukovodstvo dvuch voennykh predpriatii Khar’kova”, *Glavnoe.ua*, 22 August 2014, <http://glavnoe.ua/news/1188463>.

numbering an estimated 3,000-4,000 men—together with the battalions of pro-Russian fighters were able to cause heavy losses to the Ukrainian army, avert the impending closure of the ring of siege and occupy significant parts of the region of Donetsk.⁷³ There is also a large amount of evidence pointing to the conclusion that Russia would have further strengthened the invading troops had they met with greater resistance.

The domestic political benefits that Putin has sought to obtain by occupying Crimea and using Russian citizens and Russian propaganda to unleash civil war in the Donbass are obvious. Putin has succeeded in dramatically boosting his popularity within Russia, and has channeled the population's attention away from real economic, political, and social problems towards an artificial conflict with "Ukrainian fascists". But another consequence of this war will be a sharp increase in the influence of radical Russian nationalists within Russia itself. In Ukraine they are acquiring experience in combat and diversion. They have been learning how to create their own rebel mini-state, and how to destroy the bonds linking yesterday's loyal citizens to the state. Their dreams of a "popular uprising" supported by heavy armored combat vehicles are now taking shape in the form of real practice and real skills.

Previously, social media networks and historical reconstruction clubs were the only outlet for the energies of hundreds, if not thousands of "couch warriors" from all over Russia. Boys and (often tertiary-educated) young men adhering to nationalist views could only dream of fighting in a real-life war. Now they are becoming real fighters. They are forming powerful fraternal combat bonds and networks with men whom they would otherwise never have met. And obviously, after the Ukrainian campaign is over, they will return to Russia. Here they will undoubtedly be joined by others, fleeing charges for acts of criminal violence committed in Ukraine.

73 Minister of Defense Valerii Heletei resigned in early September following criticism of the repeated surrounding of Ukrainian troops, particularly in Ilovaisk; "Ilovaiskii kotel: predatel'stvo Genshtaba ili informatsionnaia ataka FSB?", *Politica-ua.com*, 1 September 2014, <http://politica-ua.com/ilovajskij-kotel-predatelstvo-genshtaba-ili-informacionnaya-ataka-fsb/>.

None of these people will have any incentive to return to civilian life. On the contrary, it is clear that they view the Ukrainian campaign as the first phase in the construction of a real “nationalist” (i.e. essentially totalitarian and fascist) dictatorship on the territory of the former USSR. Such people have always been and will remain to the right of Putin; they were hostile to him prior to the annexation of Crimea, and even now they accuse him of having betrayed their war in the east of Ukraine. What will the Russian authorities and Russian society do about this phenomenon? What is the next foreign project that this newly formed rebel community will decide to pursue after Ukraine? These are additional important and open-ended questions that are raised by the conflict in the Donbass.

Conclusion

The only way that Russia was able to prevent the defeat of the pro-Russian fighters in the Donbass region was by sending in soldiers from the regular army—something that could no longer be concealed. Hundreds of soldiers from Russia have lost their lives in this undeclared war. From a military perspective, Russia achieved a victory. From a political perspective, the outcome is completely open. The wording of the agreements concluded in Minsk on 5 September 2014 with the aim of achieving a (very fragile) ceasefire is far from the official goals of the leaders of the two People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The separatist entities are not recognized in the agreements and do not extend to the entire territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions but rather solely to the regions held by pro-Russian fighters and Russian soldiers. Instead of annexation to Russia or the creation of their own mini-states, the only thing the pro-Russian fighters received by way of a promise on paper was that Kiev would grant a number of districts (*raiony*) in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions a temporary special status, which the Ukrainian parliament can revoke after three years.

It is therefore also entirely unclear whether Russia's war against Ukraine has come to an end.⁷⁴ A large number of Moscow politicians have unofficially declared that Russia is withdrawing, and some of the known fighters from the pro-Russian ranks have left the Donbass region and headed back towards Russia. But battles continue to rage—initially with a lower intensity, but becoming heavier from early October 2014.

Unlike in Transnistria, where the infrastructure was not destroyed during the military conflict in the early 1990s, large sections of the Donbass region have been destroyed. The factories and coalmines have either been destroyed or shut down by disruption to the electricity and water supplies and railway connections. The reconstruction of the basic infrastructure alone will cost huge sums of money that even Russia cannot easily provide. Certainly, the example of a “dead land” of this type is hardly likely to stimulate other regions within Russia's neighbor states to strive to “return to Mother Russia”.

Nevertheless (or perhaps precisely for this reason), in view of the slow and inconsistent reaction by the EU and NATO and their refusal to send any military support to Ukraine, it is more than likely that Russia will push on and attempt to conquer the entire territory of the two regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and possibly even other

74 This text was written in September-October 2014 and a great deal has happened in the Donbass since then, of course. The most important subsequent events include the following. First, in September-December 2014 an irregular Russian army was created in the Donbass region. This army incorporated the majority of the previously semi-autonomous groups of pro-Russian fighters, and it has received a large volume of heavy weapons and materiel from Russia. Second, over the same period, a degree of one-man management (*yedinonachalie*) was established in the DNR government structures and a purge of the numerous Cossack formations oppositional to Igor' Plotnitskii was carried out in the LNR rear in January 2015. Third, an offensive was waged by Russian troops in January-February 2015 in the region of Donetsk airport, Debaltseve and Mariupol'. On the whole this offensive was unsuccessful; it led to intensified fighting and the destruction of several towns that had previously been under the control of the Ukrainian side. This offensive was the second phase of the armed conflict and in my view is certain to be far from the last. This campaign has demonstrated Russia's intention to realize the tasks of expanding the Ukrainian territory under Russian control by combining the actions of irregular and regular troops.

regions in southeast Ukraine. The certain prospect that thousands of Russian and Ukrainian lives would be lost in the process is unlikely to act as a deterrent here.

Translated from the German by Nicki Challinger.⁷⁵

75 Additional passages were later added to the translation by the editors.