

The Forbidden Kingdom: Russian Neo-Colonialism in Donbas (2014-2022)

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Ukrainian historian Serhy Plokhy argued that the last colonial empire was the Soviet Union and compared the process of Soviet disintegration to that of the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹ However, neither Soviet nor Austrian rule in the subjugated lands was colonial in a strict sense. The defining traits of metropole-colony power dynamics in a traditional imperial system are the limited sovereignty of the colonized land in the domestic sphere, heavy control from the metropolitan administration in important issues a different legal and social status for the indigenous population versus the imperial population, and the extraction of resources from the colony for the metropole's benefit.² In the classic sense, then, the last colonial empire was António de Oliveira Salazar's Portugal, with the metropole in the Iberian Peninsula and the colonies in Africa and Asia. After the collapse of Salazar's regime, the Portuguese empire faded into several free states, and classic colonialism seemed to fade into history textbooks. Nevertheless, in 2014, the Russian Federation established two colonies in eastern Ukraine: the Donetsk Popular Republic (DPR) and Luhansk Popular Republic (LPR). Up until now, contrary to the reunification narrative of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Russian occupation of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk

¹ Plokhy, Serhy, *The Last Empire*, 14

² Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "Colonialism," 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>

oblasts resembles colonial rule primarily in the administrative and legal dimensions, with the added complexity of serving as an “ideological resource” for Putin.

The Russian Federation launched its first invasion of Ukrainian territory in February 2014. The first offensive – the infiltration and annexation of Crimea – went smoothly in both a military and political sense. The Russian army invaded the peninsula clandestinely as its soldiers wore no distinctive signs and brought no banners. The official grounds for the annexation was the will of the Crimean people to “reunite” with Russia, expressed through the street protests of pro-Russian activists and through a referendum, held under the control of the Russian occupying forces.³ Despite the vocal protest from the Western democracies, Putin managed to occupy part of Ukraine almost without bloodshed, brutal repercussions for the Russian economy, or involvement in the direct military conflict with Ukraine. That was the first phase of the hybrid war that Russia would wage against Ukraine in the coming eight years.⁴

By April 2014, the Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv oblasts of Ukraine seemed to follow the Crimean path. Pro-Russian street activists took over administrative buildings. On April 12, 2014, Russian paramilitaries crossed the border with Ukraine and sacked the city of Sloviansk. Just like in Crimea, both paramilitaries and street activists called first for the independence of their regions and then for the “reunification” with Russia. Nonetheless, there was a striking difference from the Crimean case. Due to the resistance from the Ukrainian army, Russia never managed to fully occupy the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts or incorporate them within their administrative borders. Consequently, the Russian government chose a different tactic. Instead of an official

³ Rosefielde, Steven. *The Kremlin Strikes Back: Russia and the West After Crimea's Annexation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 46.

⁴ Kuzio, Taras *Putin's War against Ukraine*,

annexation, as in Crimea, Russia established two quasi-states in Eastern Ukraine, the Donetsk and Luhansk Popular Republics.⁵

The term quasi-state underscores the ambiguous position of the DPR and LPR. On paper, these were states which are independent of both Ukraine and Russia.⁶ These states lacked sovereignty in important issues, especially in foreign relations, but they enjoyed some autonomy in domestic affairs. The most significant decisions for their government consisted mainly of the representatives of the local politicians and businessmen but included some newcomers from Russia. Their population in the meantime received passports from not only the newly created states but also from Russia itself. Nevertheless, this citizenship was second-class. For instance, unlike the Crimeans, the inhabitants of the occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk did not have access to Russian pensions until 2022, eight years into the conflict.⁷ That power dynamic distinguished the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine from the annexed Crimean peninsula.

The apparent equation of Russian politics towards Eastern Ukraine and the classic colonialism of the 19th or 20th century is a crude methodological approach. The occupation of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts did not bring Russia any raw materials or other economic advantages as it would have in the nineteenth century. On the contrary, Russia spent resources on maintaining local armies and governments. When the republics were on the edge of collapse in the summer of 2014, the Russian

⁵ Pawel Pieniazek. *Greetings From Novorossiia: Eyewitness to the War in Ukraine*. Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies. Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017, 55-74.

⁶ Matsuzatom Kimiyaka, "The First Four Years of Donetsk Popular Republic" in David R. Marples. *The War in Ukraine's Donbas: Origins, Contexts, and the Future*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022, pages 43-69, 43.

⁷ Kremlin, "Executive Order on Payments to Citizens of DPR, LPR, Ukraine and Stateless Persons Who Were Forced to Leave Their Countries and Arrived in Russia" (President of Russia, August 27, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69219>.

army even intervened in the war directly, initially with artillery strikes and later – with a direct invasion of the Russian infantry and armored corps into the bordering districts of Ukraine.⁸ Nonetheless, Putin gained advantages from indirect control over these territories. The hybrid authority over Donetsk and Luhansk gave Putin an ideological edge in the Russian domestic sphere and helped him promote his imperialistic agenda both within and outside of the Russian Federation. In this paper, we argue that the phenomenon of the occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk Popular Republics is an instance of neocolonialism in the “information era.” A center – the Russian Federation – employs classic tools of colonialism to maintain its power over the periphery but the benefit gained from colonization is ideological and informational rather than economic.

It is important to mention that Putin prefers the colonial period of Russian history to the Soviet era of the alleged interethnic equality. On numerous occasions, he has referred to the establishment of the national republics in the Soviet Union as the ticking time bomb under the whole structure of the Soviet Union.⁹ In his article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Putin, however, depicts the Imperial period as a time of peaceful coexistence of the nations in Ukraine, omitting or whitewashing the instances of oppression of the Ukrainians in the Russian framework.¹⁰ Thus, the reinstitution of the imperial practices in his worldview might be one of the first steps to reintegrate the Ukrainians into the Russian state.

⁸ Melnyk, Olexander, “War Dead and Intercommunal Ethics in the Russo-Ukrainian Borderlands” in Marples. *The War in Ukraine’s Donbas: Origins, Contexts, and the Future*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022., 123-159.

⁹ Putin, Vladimir, “Speech on Acknowledgement of Donetsk and Luhansk Popular Republics” February 21, 2022

¹⁰ Putin, Vladimir “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” July 12, 2021, <https://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

For Putin, such reintegration is a source of ideological legitimacy. That is not new to the Russian leadership, since the fifteenth century, the possession or repossession of Ukrainian lands has played a big role in Russian ideology. The control over the Dnieper region maintained the alleged succession between the Kievan Rus' and the Russian State. The Kyivan origins were a big part of the legal foundations for the rule of the Russian Tsars and the notion of “regathering of the Russian lands” was one of the motivations for the expansionist encroachment of Russians in Eastern Europe up until the twentieth century.¹¹ For Putin, the title of the “gatherer of the Russian lands” has also a very practical meaning. It gives a big boost to his approval ratings within Russia and informally legitimizes the augmentation of his dictatorial powers. Thus, Donbas is indeed a source of a very important resource for Vladimir Putin. This resource is not coal or any other raw material that one can find in the soil of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. It is ideological support for both Putin’s foreign and domestic affairs. Our paper shows how Vladimir Putin extracted this resource at the expense of the indigenous population of Donbas.

The importance of the colonial conceptualization of Russian rule in the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine (up until 2022) lies in two dimensions. On the one hand, it better explains the experience of the people in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts than the common notions of the “occupation,” civil war, hybrid war, or Russian irredentism. Each of these concepts either gives too much agency to the people of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and exacerbates tensions between Eastern Ukraine and the Center in Kyiv, or fails to acknowledge the role that the local elites played in the unfolding of the

¹¹ Plokhy, Serhii. *Lost kingdom: the quest for empire and the making of the Russian nation, from 1470 to the present*. 2017

conflict. Moreover, none of them, except for the “hybrid war,” manages to elucidate why Vladimir Putin and his government had started the war in Donbas; intervened in it directly in April, July, and August of 2014; and supported the proxies indirectly throughout all eight years; and yet refused to annex Donbas officially. Finally, none of the listed four concepts clarifies the controversy between Russian propaganda about the “Russianness” of the people of Donbas and their position as second-class citizens in Russian society, politics, and military, even after they received Russian passports.

Researchers and international institutions employ the notion of a hybrid war to describe the situation in Eastern Ukraine from 2014-2022.¹² Its hybridity manifests itself through the fact that Russian forces up until 2022 had not invaded Ukraine openly, with the exception of Crimea in February-March of 2014. Officially, these were the Donbas rebels and the Russian volunteers, who carried out the military operations. In reality, however, the Russian army achieved the majority of the victories on the battlefield, including the decisive defeats of the Ukrainian army in Debaltsevo and Ilovaysk. In both cases, the Russians pretended to fight as volunteers; nonetheless, they remained structurally a part of the Russian army. Taras Kuzio in *Putin’s War Against Ukraine: Revolutions, Nationalism, and Crime* claims that such a disguise and success were made possible by the support of the local population in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. According to Kuzio, a hybrid war is possible only when the invading force can hide among the local proxies; consequently, a hybrid war is fought together by both locals and invaders in disguise.¹³ This puts too much responsibility on the people of Donetsk

¹²Cherviatsova, Alena “Hybrid War and Hybrid Law: Minsk Agreements in the Context of International Law and Ukrainian Legislation” in David R. Marples. *The War in Ukraine’s Donbas : Origins, Contexts, and the Future*. Central European University Press, 2022., pages 29-43

¹³ Kuzio, Taras, *Putin’s War Against Ukraine*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, 256

and Luhansk oblasts. In fact many of them resisted Russia and openly refused to subscribe to the cause of the “Russian Spring.” Even Igor Strelkov-Girkin, the leader of the first Russian paramilitary group to enter the Donetsk Oblast, complained that Donetsk as a region did not want to fight.¹⁴ The concept of the “hybrid war” fails to explain the internal dynamics of the conflicted region.

Additionally, Alina Cherviatsova in the article “Hybrid War and Hybrid Law: Minsk Agreements in the Context of International Law and Ukrainian Legislation” explains how the war benefited the international standing of Russia. As Russia was not officially part of the conflict, it avoided many economic and symbolic consequences. For instance, the official documents and statements of the European institutions did not condemn the Russian government for the invasion of Ukraine, only for the support of separatists in the East. That minimized the degree of the economic sanctions levied against Russia.¹⁵ Such a situation exposes the motives for the constant renouncement of direct participation in the war. However, it doesn’t explain the hybrid nature of Russian rule in Donetsk and Luhansk Popular republics. Cherviatsova does not focus on the dynamic between Moscow, Luhansk, and Donetsk, which would showcase how Moscow was interested in the region itself, not only in employing it to fight against Ukraine. Such interest manifested itself through the intense passportization campaign, a heavy level of control over the administration of the enclaves, and the establishment of specific governmental agencies to develop policies toward them. These practices shifted the balance of hybridity closer to actual occupation.

¹⁴ Chalenko, Alexander, “Strelkov bez Kupiur. Interv’iu s Komandirom. [Strelkov Uncut. An Interview with Commander]” *Voennoie Obozrenie*, December 2, 2014.

¹⁵ Cherviatsova, Alena “Hybrid War and Hybrid Law: Minsk Agreements in the Context of International Law and Ukrainian Legislation” in David R. Marples. *The War in Ukraine’s Donbas : Origins, Contexts, and the Future*. Central European University Press, 2022., pages 29-43

The notion of occupation remains pervasive within Ukrainian media and the speeches of Ukrainian officials. Article 42 of the Hague Regulations states that a territory is occupied if it is under the direct control of a hostile army.¹⁶ Indeed, as mentioned above, the Russian army was both directly and indirectly present in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts from 2014 on. The concepts of “occupation” or “conquest” express the unique experience of the population of Eastern Ukraine. The framing of the war as a “rebellion from below” required Russia to establish local institutions at least formally responsible for the internal issues of the republics. Russia did not need to maintain a heavy military presence to keep Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in check. Local collaborators backed by Moscow, including the first president of DPR, Alexander Zakharchenko, worked on behalf of the Russian government within their oblast, enjoying some level of sovereignty in domestic and economic spheres, but lacking true independence, especially in international affairs.

The participation of Donbas elites leads some scholars to overestimate the role of the internal Ukrainian conflict in the events of 2014-2022. Dominique Arel in *Ukraine’s Unnamed War* describes the tensions within Ukrainian society as the major precursor for the war. He views the war in Donbas as the continuation of the political confrontation between the Eastern and Western regions of Ukraine. In chapter 6, Arel argues that, after the Maidan and annexation of Crimea, Russophonic Ukrainians felt a temptation to start identifying as Russians, and this galvanized the process of the “Russian Spring.”¹⁷ What this leaves out is that, without the Russian military and political involvement, the conflict would never have started in the first place. Ukrainian

¹⁶ Convention of Hague, 1907, Article 42, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/hague-conv-iv-1907>

¹⁷ Arel, Dominique, and Jesse Driscoll. *Ukraine’s Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

street political life was always proliferating; nonetheless, before the spring of 2014, never had these politics devolved into direct violent confrontation. The Russian military intervention of 2014 was not simply a game-changer, but a game-starter. Aurel's concept, thus, overemphasizes internal Ukrainian political dynamics and individual actors.

Finally, the Russian media claims that the people of Donetsk and Luhansk never stopped identifying as Russian. The Revolution of Dignity, according to Russian propaganda, simply sparked their pro-Russian sentiment.¹⁸ In this narrative, the war in Donbas is the consequence of the rebellion of the Donetsk and Luhansk populations that did not subscribe to the allegedly fascist coup of Maidan in 2014.¹⁹ The factual problem of this narrative is obvious: the people of Donetsk and Luhansk in their majority accepted the new government in Kyiv and were against pro-Russian separatism. Additionally, this narrative contradicts itself. If the people of Eastern Ukraine truly wanted to join Russia, why did the Russian Federation not annex them like it did with Crimea? Why did Putin's army not march openly into allegedly pro-Russian cities of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, but let the Ukrainian army liberate them from the pro-Russian forces?

Considering the above, the notion of colonization is the most useful way to describe the war and Russian presence in Eastern Ukraine. On one hand, the descriptor underscores the collaboration of the local political and business elites with the invaders and encapsulates how Russia governed the DPR and LPR between 2014 and 2022. On

¹⁸ "Donbass, Khronologiiia Glavnykh Sobyti (2014-2022) [Donbas: The Chronology of the Main events]" *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 12:06, March 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6o1jvrCLMA&rco=1>

¹⁹ Alexeev, Mikhail and Halle, Henry. "Rallying Around the Leader More Than Around the Flag: Changes in Russian Nationalist Public Opinion in 2013-2014" in Blakissrud, Helge and Kolsto, Pal, *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity, and Authoritarianism, 2000-15*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016, 192-221, 197.

the other hand, it acknowledges the inequality between Russians born in the Ukrainian state and Russians from the Russian Federation within the “Russian World” (*ruskii mir*), brought by Putin and his army to Eastern Ukraine. The concept of the occupied regions of Donbas as colonized effectively debunks the narrative of the war as a part of a larger process of reconciliation of historically Russian lands and showcases instead a divide between Russians of different origins under Putin’s regime. Finally, it gives us a chance to better understand the origins of Putin’s quest to fight for Donbas in the first place and keep it in limbo between the Russian and the Ukrainian states up until 2022.

This paper starts with a comparison between the Russian policies toward the occupied Donbas regions and the Russian administration of the colonized Ukrainian lands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Then, we describe how these policies affected the population of the Donetsk and Luhansk Popular Republics and the position of the indigenous population in the newly established colonial framework. Finally, we describe how the Russian government uses the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk Popular Republics as sources of ideological resources to maintain the dictatorial regime of Vladimir Putin.

How Donbas is Ruled: Russian Neocolonialism in the Administration of DPR and LPR

The pro-Russian forces gained control over the first cities of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in April of 2014. The regional separatists took the city administration buildings, as well as the police precincts, and the building of the Ukrainian Security Services (SBU). The Russian paramilitaries, under the command of Igor Strelkov-Girkin, an ex-FSB agent, entered the Donetsk oblast and took the city of Slaviansk under

control. On April 7th, the pro-Russian proxies declared the establishment of DPR. On April 28th, already after the outbreak of the actual war, the Luhansk proxies followed their example. These declarations launched a new chapter in the history of Eastern Ukraine.²⁰ Under Russia's total control, two new entities emerged. Officially, they were independent states. In reality, these were Russian colonies, with limited sovereignty over their territory, people foreign to the region in the governments, the specific agency in Moscow to administer them, and local elites effectively collaborating with the newcomers.

Since the very beginning of the covert operations in Eastern Ukraine, Russia relied heavily on local activists and politicians. In 2004, during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the governor of Kharkiv, Evgenii Kushnarev, organized the Severodonetsk Congregation of the People's Deputies. That was the congress of the pro-Russian civil officials, joined by the Mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, and a presidential candidate, Victor Yanukovitch, which demanded an establishment of the autonomous South-Eastern Ukrainian Republic as a Federal unit within Ukraine.²¹ Then, this project of the Eastern Ukrainian politicians failed. However, that was not a reason not to employ Ukrainian politicians further, in bringing a completely different project of the Russian government to life.

The pro-Russian politicians and businessmen – the representatives of the Eastern Ukrainian elite – played a big role in maintaining Russian power in Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts*. They possessed a significant degree of autonomy in addressing and resolving domestic issues. Nonetheless, Moscow was still the dominant decision

²⁰ Kuzio, Taras, *Putin's War Against Ukraine*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, 28-29.

²¹ Wilson, Andrew, *Ukraine's Orange Revolution*. Yale University Press, 2005, 145-149

maker. Moreover, Russian backing in the turbulent political environment of Donbas since 2014 was the only guarantee of both political and physical survival.

The fate of Alexander Zakharchenko, the first president of the DPR, showcases all three trends listed in the previous paragraph. Zakharchenko was fully local, born in Donetsk and living his entire life in Ukraine. Until 2014, he was a businessman, with experience in various fields and several millions of dollars in assets.²² Nevertheless, in 2014, he joined the “Oplot” – the force wing of the Anti-Maidan movement.²³ In none of the interviews did he manage to explain the motivations behind this decision. Even his closest comrades acknowledged that Zakharchenko’s background was very far from that of a revolutionary.²⁴ Nonetheless, it was a good background to serve as a local collaborator. Zakharchenko knew the region pretty well, had negotiation experience, and the authority among Donetsk property-owners; consequently, he could represent the pro-Russian forces on the land. His participation in the war during the summer of 2014, gained him some credit among the proxies themselves. For his motivations, according to the investigations of the independent Russian media, Insider, Zakharchenko’s businesses were connected to many people of the “Party of Regions,” a pro-Russian party, backing the Ukrainian president, Victor Yanukovitch (2010-2014), which lost power after the Maidan protest. Moreover, some of them might have been connected to Russia itself.²⁵ Thus, in Zakharchenko, the Russians found what they were

²² Prilepin, Zakhar *Vsio Chto Dolzhno Razreshitsia* [Everything that Shall Be Resolved], Moscow:AST, 2016, 93

²³ “Zakharchenko, Alexander Vladimirovich” *Tass,Ru*, accessed 04/25/2024, <https://tass.ru/encyclopedia/person/zaharchenko-aleksandr-vladimirovich>

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 93

²⁵ Scerbina, Sergey, “Sviaz’ DNR: Tenevye Khoziaieva Donbassa [The DPR Connections: The Shadow Owners of Donbass]” *Insider*, December 12, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140918041253/http://www.theinsider.ua/business/5412a6d620c10/>

looking for in the potential head of the colony. He was local, loyal, and had some authority in the region.

With Russian support, Zakharchenko rose to prominence in August of 2014 during the first political crisis in the newly established DPR. By that time, the Russian proxy, Igor Strelkov, who started the war and carried out the first successful military operation had already lost the city of Sloviansk and came to Donetsk to coordinate local military efforts as a Defense Minister. Zakharchenko, the military commandant of Donetsk, disagreed with Strelkov on tactical matters. Even pro-Russian memoirists, such as Zakhar Prilepin or Pavel Gubarev, who tried to present the war in Donbas as a local rebellion, acknowledged that Moscow was the only place where it was possible to resolve the confrontation between the Russian invaders and the Donetsk collaborators. The answer from the metropolis was unexpected: the Russians sided with Zakharchenko and ordered Strelkov to leave the Donetsk Oblast. Zakharchenko, on the contrary, was appointed to be a leader of the republic.²⁶ Officially, he was inaugurated in November.²⁷

Zakharchenko possessed limited authority over the internal issues of the republics and no power over the crucial decisions about their fate. For instance, he was the one to resolve the economic problems of the DPR. At some point, he bought 3.5 tonnes of potatoes to stabilize the prices on them within the occupied territory. The operation was successful: the business had to lower the prices of the food to be able to compete with the government-sponsored enterprises selling potatoes. Nevertheless, in the foreign politics, the republics remained puppets of Russia, and the opinion of Zakharchenko did not matter to the people in Moscow that much. In 2014 and 2015, the

²⁶ Prilepin, 148, Gubarev, Pavel, *Fake! Novorossii*, <https://history.wikireading.ru/278056>

²⁷ “V Donetske Proshla Inauguratsiia Zakharchenko [Zakharchenko was Inaugurated in Donetsk]”, 9:59, 4 November, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0w6-XbgwJ8o>

Russian government insisted on Donetsk proxies to sign the Minsk Accords. This treaty assumed that the DPR and LPR would be a part of a highly federalized Ukrainian state and would let Ukrainians control the border with Russia.²⁸ The Russian government had no interest in pursuing this treaty, but Zakharchenko created a lot of image problems for the Russian and pro-Russian side by openly stating that the DPR side would not abide by them and would not allow Ukrainian troops into its territory.²⁹ Despite his vocal position, Zakharchenko still signed the accords because that was the will of Moscow. In the process, crucial for the very existence of the so-called Popular Republic, Zakharchenko had no more authority than any other citizen.

In 2018, the cafe “Separ” in which Zakharchenko was holding a meeting blew up. The first President of the so-called DPR died. Republican investigative authorities accused Ukrainians of the assassination of Zakharchenko. The Russian Bureau of Investigations (*Sledstvennyi Komitet*) opened a terrorism case.³⁰ However, according to widespread theories, Zakharchenko’s murder in 2018 was a repercussion coming from the Russians for disobedience after Minsk.³¹ It is important to acknowledge that there is no sufficient evidence to that theory, as well as to the Ukrainian trace in Zakharchenko’s assassination.

The successor as well as colleagues of Zakharchenko from the DPR government also showcase the trend of employment of the local elites in the Donbas administration

²⁸ “Polnyi Tekst Minskikh Soglashenii [Full Text of Minsk Accords]”, *Ria Novosti*, February 12, 2015, <https://ria.ru/20150212/1047311428.html>

²⁹ “Zakharchenko: Nikoga ne Budem Chat’iu Ukrainy [Zakharchenko: We will Never be a Part of Ukraine]” *Fakti ICTV*, 2:31, May 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTBwYqnBzR4&t=1s>

³⁰ “SKR Vozbudil Delo Po Faktu Mezhdunarodnogo Terrorisma posle Vzryva v Donetske [SKR Started an Investigation on the International Terrorism after the Donetsk Explosion.]” *Interfax*, August 31, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180901012737/https://www.interfax.ru/russia/627451>

³¹ Fox, Amos C. “Strategic Relationships, Risk, and Proxy War.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 2 (2021): 1–24, 6

by the Russian government. The second president of the DPR, Denis Pushilin, was a local manager of the MMM financial pyramide and a failed politician – in 2012, he tried to get elected into the Verkhovna Rada in Kyiv, but gained only 0.08 percent.³² The First minister of Connection – a rare position in the contemporary state – in Donetsk was a rich businessman from Kherson, Victor Iatsenko. Like Zakharchenko, his business interests were more connected to Russia than to Europe; consequently, he supported the anti-Maidan movement. The Russian invaders found him, an educated man with business connections, quite useful. Already in April of 2014, he went to Slaviansk to connect Igor Strelkov to the pro-Russian proxies in Donetsk.³³ The area for future research in this domain is to create a list of the civilian officers of the governments of Donetsk and Luhans Popular Republics, with an analysis of their background

The employment of the local elites in the administration of the territory is not new to Russian and worldwide colonialism. The British heavily relied on rajas to maintain control over Southern India. The same Russians employed the local elites in their colonization encroachments in Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Central Asia. In Kazakhstan, for instance, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the local elite kept a record of the indigenous population and helped the Tsarist regime to maintain control over them.³⁴ The closest historical precedent for the position of the president of the DPR was the hetman of Ukrainian cossacks in the 17th-18th centuries. At the beginning of the Russian colonization of Ukraine in the seventeenth century, the Zaporozhia Cossacks

³² “Novyi Lider Donetskikh Separatistov Okazalsia Funktsionerom MMM [The New Leader of Donetsk Separatists Turned out to be An MMM Manager]” *ZN.UA*, April 6, 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20200526185338/http://zn.ua/POLITICS/novyy-lider-doneckih-separatistov-okazalsya-funkcionerom-mmm-142706_.html

³³ Prilepin, 88

³⁴ Alexander Morrison, Cloé Drieu, and Aminat Chokobaeva. *The Central Asian Revolt of 1916: A Collapsing Empire in the Age of War and Revolution*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2020.

were allowed to elect the hetman, the local military leader. Originally, the hetman could carry out independent domestic and even foreign politics, while keeping in mind the Russian Tsar as his superior. With time passing, the Tsarist administration circumscribed the authority of the Hetman further and further. After the Russian army under command of Peter the Great in 1709 crushed the attempt of hetman Ivan Mazepa to break away from the Empire, hetman was supposed to abide strictly by the orders from Russia. Peter the Great, for instance, imprisoned the hetman Polubotok for an attempt to carry out an internal reform, uncoordinated with Saint-Petersburg. Henceforth, while hetman remained as a performative figure, the majority of the decisions about Ukraine were made in Saint-Petersburg-based *Malorossiskaia Kollegiia* – a Ministry of Ukrainian Affairs.³⁵

Malorossiiskaia Kollegiia is also not a unique undertaking in the history of world colonialism. The aforementioned Great Britain established the Colonial Office - a specific agency to execute British control over the colonies in North America, Africa, and Asia to govern India, the most precious pearl in the British Empire, the Parliament established a separate India Office, which existed up until India declared independence in 1947. In Russia too, Ukraine was not the only region to be governed through a special body of the executive power. In the 16th century, Ivan the Terrible founded two ministries, *Prikazy*, as they were called at the time, to govern the newly conquered lands of Siberia and Kazan. New colonial project of Russia also could not have existed without such an institution.

³⁵ Plokyh, Serhy, *Gates of Europe: The History of Ukraine*, New York, NY : Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015

Russia, however, did not establish a specific branch of the government to deal with the Donetsk and Luhansk Popular Republics. That would have been too apparent for the hybrid character of the war against Ukraine, discussed in the introduction. Moreover, in the executive branch of the Russian power structure, the ministers still have rather low positions. Since the arrival of Putin to power in 2000, the administration of the president started to accumulate more and more authority. This political body, originally responsible for aiding the president in bureaucratic work, became the center of political power and decision-making.³⁶ It played an especially crucial role for Donbas, given that the whole project of the Russian Spring and Donbas republics was always curated from one of the branches of the Russian presidential administration: *Upravleniie Prezidenta po Prigranichnomu Sotrudnichestvu* – the Management of the Near Abroad Cooperation.

Putin had established this branch of the Administration as early as in 2012, two years before the invasion of Ukraine. Originally, it was indeed mostly focused on the countries bordering Russia and the occupied parts of Georgia, Abkhaz, and Southern Ossetia. Since 2014, this branch covertly started curating the Donetsk and Luhansk occupied oblasts. In 2018, it got an official framing: the division, responsible for the DPR, the LPR, and Ukraine was officially separated from the division responsible for the relationship with other post-Soviet countries. The head of the division, however, remained the same: Oleg Govorun, an ex-minister of the Regional Development of Russia. Notwithstanding that, many sources with access to the Kremlin claimed that the true head of the division was no one but Vladislav Surkov, one of the most famous of

³⁶ Ria Laenen, and Katlijn Malfliet. 2007. *Elusive Russia : Current Developments in Russian State Identity and Institutional Reform Under President Putin*. Leuven, [Belgium]: Leuven University Press., 23

Putin's assistants, who is also, according to many scholars and media, responsible for the development of the ideology of Putin's Russia.³⁷

Without access to the archives of Russia and Donetsk, it remains very difficult to establish the true role of Vladislav Surkov in the whole process of the invasion of Eastern Ukraine. The only way for us to assess his importance is to study memoirs, interviews with participants of the invasion, and reported insider information from the Kremlin. In the Russian media, it is a common point that Surkov was behind the *Novorossiia* project – and the establishment of the semi-sovereign state in Eastern Ukraine. This claim is supported by the leaks from Surkov's email.³⁸ In the article, dedicated to the reform of the border division of the administration of president, the newspaper "Kommersant," emphasizes that the new branch would be in charge of the Donbas issues under the control of Surkov. The memoirists also spill the beans on the participation of the Kremlin's "grey cardinal" as Surkov is called sometimes, in the Donbas affairs Prilepin, for instance, mentions how Surkov called Zakharchenko directly from his cabinet. The connection between these two people was rather special and to a large extent resembled not simply colonial but also medieval practices: Surkov was a godfather of Zakharchenko's daughter.³⁹

The coalition of Russian employees of the Presidential Administration and the Donbas business elite and failed politicians helped Putin maintain political control over the newly acquired territory. The pro-Russian proxies, indigenous to Donbas, were

³⁷ Safronov, Ivan, Ivanov, Maksim, "Upravleniie s Prigranichnymi Vozmozhnostiami [The Division with the Borderland Possibilities]", *Kommersant*, October 3, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190403141510/https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3759024>

³⁸ "Chto Soderzhitsia v Opublikovannukh Khakerami Pis'makh Surkova" *BBC: Russkaia Sluzhba*, November 3, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161230090138/http://www.bbc.com/russian/features-37855406>

³⁹ Prilepin, 217

responsible for the domestic affairs of the colonies. The special agency in Moscow dealt with the most important issues on the international arena: the war and the peace. Such a division showcases classic relations between the colony and the metropole, encountered both in the Western colonial empires and the Russian history of expansion.

Passportization: The Creation of a Citizenry and a Second-Class

Passport reforms implemented in Russia between 2002 and 2019 led to the mass “passportization” of populations living in both the frozen and active conflict zones in which Russia was involved: Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and, of course, Donbas. Passportization is defined as the acceleration of “extraterritorial naturalization en masse of citizens residing in contested territories of a third country,” usually sponsored by the titular country of the majority ethnic group of the region in question.⁴⁰ This is not specific to Russian, and a number of other European countries, including Hungary and Romania, also engage in passportization. However, countries other than Russia tend to use passportization in a limited manner that is aimed at providing native titular-language speakers (ex. Hungarian speakers or Romanian speakers) or the descendents of citizens with fast-tracked citizenship. Russia’s passportization policy is exceptional. According to the Warsaw Institute, “The distribution of Russian passports was a deliberate operation aimed at maintaining Russian influence in the conflict zones and increasing the political dependence of these territories on Moscow’s policies.”⁴¹ So,

⁴⁰ Elia Bescotti et al., “Passportization,” *Verfassungsblog: On Matters Constitutional*, March 23, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.17176/20220323-121238-0>.

⁴¹ Jakub Lachert, “Russia Hands Out Passports to Its Diaspora,” Warsaw Institute, February 18, 2020, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russia-hands-passports-diaspora/>.

passportization becomes not an ethnolinguistic citizenship policy but a *colonial* policy that increases dependence of the periphery on the center.

Passportization for the Russian Federation has become, therefore, a foreign policy practice which has been used as a tool to legitimize Russian interests in its near abroad. The internal justification of such a passportization campaign is thus: our nation has “citizens” living in foreign, sovereign territories who must be protected from ethnic cleansing at the hands of Russophobic others, and, by issuing them passports and aiding them militarily, we can protect them and therefore ourselves. Under these conditions, the Russian Federation can justify intervention as a preventative measure, as Putin did in his speech delivered on February 24, 2022, after launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine:

“They did not leave us any other option for defending Russia and our people, other than the one we are forced to use today. In these circumstances, we have to take bold and immediate action. The people’s republics of Donbass have asked Russia for help.”⁴²

Since the beginning of separatist movement in Donbas in 2014, approximately 650,000 Russian passports have been distributed in occupied territories. According to the Russian government, these passports have been granted on “humanitarian grounds.”⁴³ The passports are only one facet of a larger policy of integration, as well as a tool of interference in Ukrainian sovereignty.⁴⁴ Since the mass passportization efforts in Donbas, however, Donbas citizens have faced a sort of second-class citizenship. As of April 2024, Freedom House gives the territory of Eastern Donbas a Global Freedom

⁴² Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

⁴³ Peter Dickinson, “Russian Passports: Putin’s Secret Weapon in the War against Ukraine,” *Atlantic Council UkraineAlert* (blog), April 13, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russian-passports-putins-secret-weapon-in-the-war-against-ukraine/>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Score of 2/100, with political rights scoring -1/40 and civil liberties scoring 3/60. Currently, the region's electoral process receives zero points out of twelve as the head of government was not democratically elected, and neither was the national legislature, and they have no free and fair electoral laws or framework.⁴⁵ Political pluralism receives zero points out of sixteen, and the functioning of the government receives zero out of twelve points. Additionally, Freedom House deducts a point as "the government or occupying power [is] deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group."⁴⁶ To explain this, the organization cites the increasing danger posed to Ukrainian-identifying citizens between 2014 and present, which has caused most Ukrainian residents to flee the region and remaining Ukrainians to claim Russian ethnicity for personal safety. Civil liberties are slightly better ranked. Zero points are awarded for a free and independent media, academic freedom, and freedom of thought and speech without fear of surveillance or retribution, but freedom of religion is awarded one point.⁴⁷ Associational and organizational rights also receive zero points out of twelve and rule of law zero out of sixteen. Personal autonomy and individual rights receive one point in the category of personal social freedoms, such as the right to elective marriage and family planning, and one point for equality of opportunity.⁴⁸ For comparison, Crimea has an overall Global Freedom Score of 2/100, Belarus of 8/100, Russia of 13/100, Ukraine of 49/100, the United States of 83/100, the United Kingdom of 91/100, and Canada of 97/100.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ "Freedom in the World 2024: Eastern Donbas," Freedom House, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/eastern-donbas/freedom-world/2024#PR>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Freedom House only documents rights violations within the territory of Donbas, however, and the second-class status of Donbas citizens expands into the role of their Russian passports. In 2019, Putin signed a decree that simplified the citizenship process for citizens of the Peoples' Republics, granting them not just access to Russian passports but to full citizenship. The decree was announced as a humanitarian operation aiming to protect the rights of those living in the occupied territories.⁵⁰ Between 2014 and 2019, citizens in the People's Republics, even those with Russian passports, could not participate in Russian elections or referendums. They were allowed to vote for the first time only in 2020. Additionally, until 2022, they were not eligible for social benefits tied to Russian residency, including pensions and healthcare.⁵¹ Though the 2019 decree changes the rights of citizens of the Peoples' Republics significantly on paper, specifically for those who apply for full citizenship, Freedom House shows that rights in the region are so heavily curtailed that even technical equality with Russian citizens living in the center does not translate into functional equality.

The issue of passportization is complicated by the fact that, since 2014, most Donbas citizens maintained Ukrainian citizenship. Therefore, as they were denied certain social services by Russia, they still had access to them through their Ukrainian citizenship. By registering as internally displaced persons (IDPs), they could collect their Ukrainian pensions from Ukrainian state-run banks in uncontested territories. This policy was not received well by pensioners within Donbas as traveling to collection points was difficult and sometimes dangerous as they traveled under-maintained roads

⁴⁹ "Countries and Territories," Freedom House, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.

⁵⁰ Jan Strzelecki and Krzysztof Nieczypor, "Russian Citizenship for Donbas Residents," Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), April 25, 2019, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2019-04-25/russian-citizenship-donbas-residents>.

⁵¹ Elia Bescotti et al., "Passportization."

and crossed dilapidated bridges to reach collection points.⁵² So, when Putin signed an August 2022 Executive Order allowing DPR and LPR citizens access to Russian pensions, it alleviated the issues many pensioners faced in accessing monthly payments, further increasing their reliance on Russian occupiers.⁵³

Considering the justifications for the mass passportization of the Peoples' Republics and the human rights conditions on the territory, Russian passports take on a colonial nature. The proportion of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians living in eastern Ukraine provide justification for the fast-tracking of passports to these groups by the Russian government. This creates "citizens of Russia" living within Ukraine. The existence of these citizens then legitimizes Russia's claims that they are under attack, even if the reality is that the regions are under attack because Russia sponsored a low-burn civil war in Ukraine over the eight years between the Revolution of Dignity and the full-scale invasion. As such, the passportization process has been instrumentalized to feed Russia's colonial aspirations in Ukraine and to build domestic support for the 2022 "Special Military Operation."

Not a Typical Model: Material vs. Political Resource Extraction in Occupied Donbas

Resource extraction is a major component of our colonial framework, and therefore it's vital to examine avenues in which Russia extracts resources from the LPR and DPR for its own benefit. Studying the resource extraction methods of imperial

⁵² UNHCR Staff in Stanytsia Luhanska, Ukraine, "Thousands in Eastern Ukraine Lose Access to Pensions," UNHCR | USA, June 14, 2017, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/stories/thousands-eastern-ukraine-lose-access-pensions>.

⁵³ Kremlin, "Executive Order on Payments to Citizens."

nations provides insight and helps draw the connection to Russia's unique type of resource extraction in the Donbas. Imperial powers colonized resource-rich areas to ensure a steady supply of natural resources, resulting in lucrative gains.⁵⁴ At first glance, it appears obvious that Russia's extraction model would be similar given the immense mineral and energy resources available in the Donbas.

The Donbas region is home to one of the largest coal deposits in Europe, with slightly less than 30 billion tons.⁵⁵ Due to the abundance of coal, the Donbas became known as an industrial hub for the Russian Empire in the 19th century.⁵⁶ In fact, the Donbas proved to be the most valuable industrial zone in Ukraine up until 2014.⁵⁷ Right before the invasion in 2014, the Donbas accounted for 16% of Ukraine's GDP and 27% of total Ukrainian exports.⁵⁸ Highlighting the economic might of the Donbas was still present into the 21st century due to its resources.

Map of Resources Across the Donbas

⁵⁴ Kohn Margaret and Kavita Reddy, "Colonialism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/colonialism/>.

⁵⁵ Jan Walter, "Why is the Donbas so important for Russia?," DW, June 9th, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-is-the-donbas-so-important-for-russia/a-61547512>

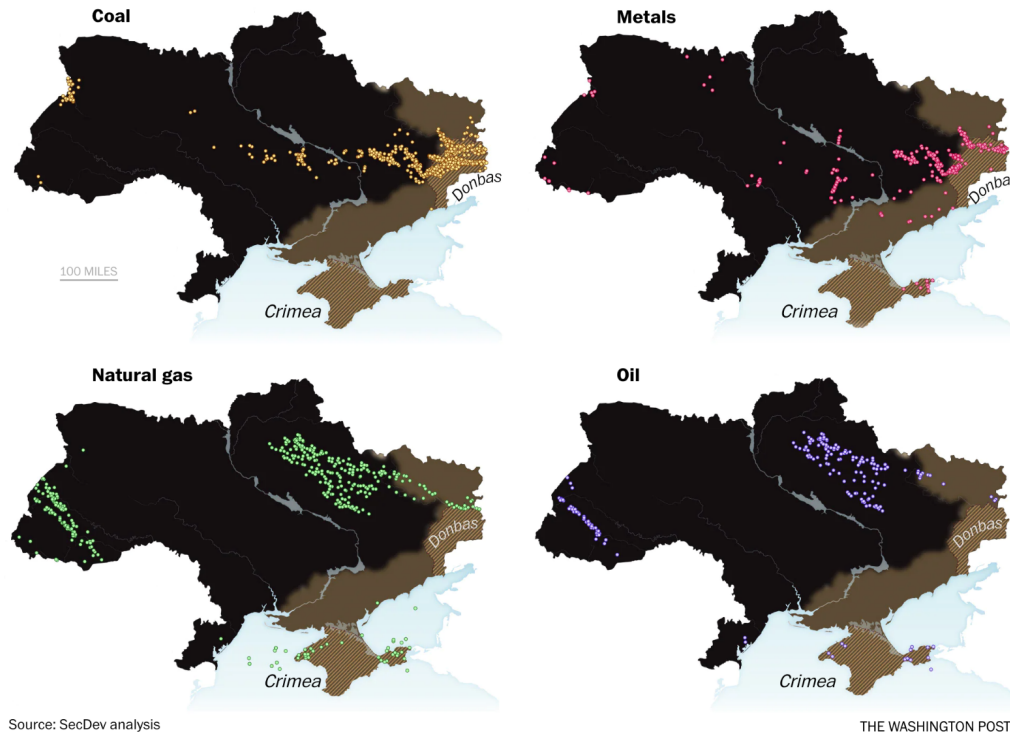
⁵⁶ Adam Swain, "Re-constructing the Post-Soviet Industrial Region," Routledge, 2007, 2.

⁵⁷ Jan Walter, Why is the Donbas so important for Russia?

⁵⁸ Taras Kuzio, "Putin's War Against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime," CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, March 11, 2017, 32

Ukraine's major resources

■ Russian-controlled areas since Feb. 24 ■ Russia-annexed (Crimea) or separatist-controlled (Donbas) areas since 2014



Even with the abundance of minerals, oil, and coal, it proved too costly for Russia to try and create a system of natural resource extraction.⁵⁹ Russia did indeed attempt to revive coal mines that occupied Donbas land, but production of coal was almost completely stopped because Ukraine refused to buy Russian-produced coal.⁶⁰ Additionally, Russia itself has the second largest coal reserves in the world, with 179 billion tons.⁶¹ Because of this, energy resources would not be an incentive for Russia to become involved in the Donbas region. Though energy resource extraction has not figured majorly in Russia's occupation of Donbas, the Kremlin *has* systematically

⁵⁹ Anthony Faiola and Dalton Bennett, "In the Ukraine war, a battle for the nation's mineral and energy wealth," Washington Post, August 10, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/10/ukraine-russia-energy-mineral-wealth/>

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Russia's Energy Overview", April 29, 2024, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/RUS>

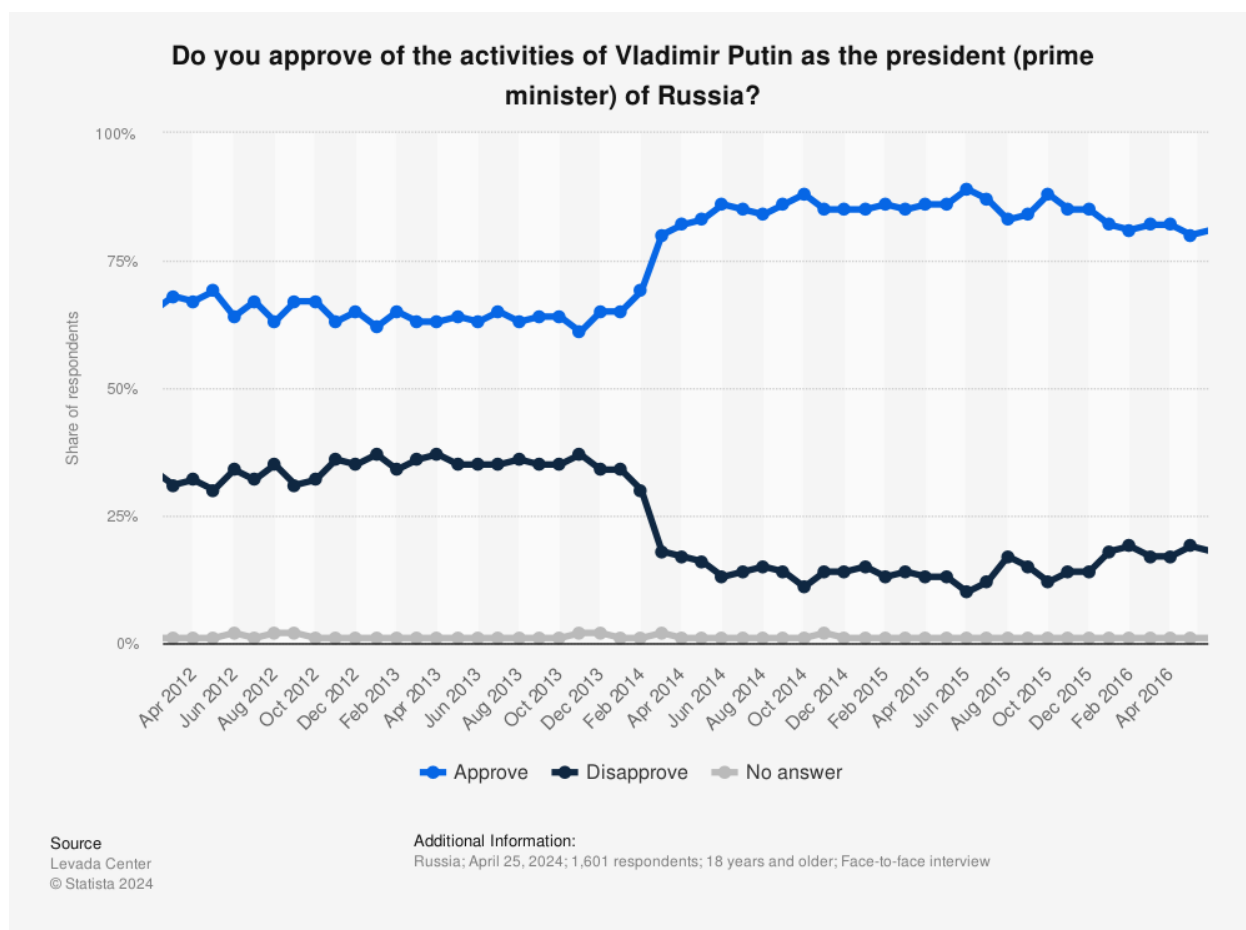
exploited its rule over Eastern Ukraine as a source of political capital to buttress its domestic and international standing. Just as imperial metropolises plundered the raw materials of their subjugated territories, Moscow has engaged in a form of political resource extraction in its Ukrainian colonial enclaves.⁶² The precise nature of this political resource extraction is multivalent. Indeed, the annexation of Donbas has proven lucrative along three fronts: performance legitimacy, nationalist ideology, and regional hegemony.

The Kremlin's swift annexation of Donbas capped off an unprecedented spike in Putin's approval rating following the Russian forces' success in Crimea. As the crisis escalated from low-intensity separatist tumult to outright military intervention and purported statehood aspirations, Putin's popularity surged (see figure below).⁶³ Broad support for the Putin regime peaked in April 2014 and sustained its heights despite waning marginal returns in Russian military operations. The particular resilience of these public approval gains is anomalous when contextualized with the generally short time-scale of "Rally 'Round the Flag Effects" in armed conflicts.⁶⁴

⁶² Siakwah, Pius. "Political Economy of the Resource Curse in Africa Revisited: The Curse as a Product and a Function of Globalised Hydrocarbon Assemblage." *Development and Society* 46, no. 1 (2017): 83.

⁶³ Levada Center, *Putin's Approval Rating Indicator*, April 2012 – April 2016

⁶⁴ Oneal, John R., and Anna Lillian Bryan. "The Rally 'Round the Flag Effect in U. S. Foreign Policy Crises, 1950-1985." *Political Behavior* 17, no. 4 (1995): 380.



Intertwined with the Putin regime's performance legitimacy rationales, the Donbas crisis has emerged as an indispensable ideological resource pool for promoting a brand of ethno-nationalist revanchism that falsely hearkens back to Russia's imperial golden age.⁶⁵ With its potent historical-civilizational overtones equating the annexation of Donbas to an elemental struggle over the soul of the Russian world, the conflict has added invaluable grist to the Kremlin's mythmaking aims of restoring its self-appointed sphere of influence across the former Soviet peripheries.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Kolstø, Pål. "The Ethnification of Russian Nationalism." In *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*, edited by Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, 21. Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

This revanchist narrative draws heavily from a seminal colonial-style belief in Russia's civilizing mission at the Eurasian frontiers and the purported unity of the eastern Slavic peoples under the Muscovite metropole.⁶⁷ Although the rhetoric of a "Russian World" transcending modern political boundaries is cloaked in a veneer of ethno-linguistic kinship, it unmistakably echoes the imperial logics of Czarist Russia.⁶⁸ The paradoxical conferment of Russian citizenship rights and protections to Donbas Ukrainians— while still subjecting them to civil deprivations— precisely mirrors this cynical colonial duality.

By defying the international norms codified in the Minsk agreements, the Kremlin has demonstrated a resolute disregard for the sovereignty of its neighbors in pursuit of its interests.⁶⁹ This has sent a powerful signal to other post-Soviet states, reinforcing Russia's position as the foremost powerbroker across the former Soviet Union.⁷⁰ The particular exigence of reaffirming Russian regional hegemony is unmistakable. With ascendant Chinese influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, many of Russia's closest allies have cultivated an interest in upending the status quo.⁷¹ Persistent contestation over the Russian-occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia— as well as the lingering specter of war in Dagestan and Chechnya— further contextualize perceptions of Russian regional hegemony's historical insecurity.⁷²

⁶⁶ Lieven, Dominic. "The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as Imperial Polities." *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 4 (1995): 619.

⁶⁷ Kuzio, Taras. "Russian National Identity and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis." *Federal Academy for Security Policy*, 2016: 3.

⁶⁸ Wortman, Richard. "The Russian Empire and Russian Monarchy: The Problem of Russian Nationalism." In *Russian Monarchy: Representation and Rule*, 223. Academic Studies Press, 2013.

⁶⁹ International Crisis Group. "Minsk Disagreements." *Peace in Ukraine (II): A New Approach to Disengagement*. International Crisis Group, 2020.

⁷⁰ Van Metre, Lauren, Viola G. Gienger, and Kathleen Kuehnast. "The Ukraine-Russia Conflict: Signals and Scenarios for the Broader Region." US Institute of Peace, 2015.

⁷¹ Stronski, Paul, and Nicole Ng. "COOPERATION AND COMPETITION: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018.

In sum, Russia's occupation of Donbas represents a political resource to be mined for the reinvigoration of Russian power through distinctly colonial modes of exploitation. By fomenting and perpetuating separatist unrest, the Kremlin manufactured political capital that could be strategically expended to fortify domestic authoritarianism, project regional hegemony, and promote ideological aspirations of restoring Russia's great power status. Thus, parallels to classic colonial ventures of political-economic extraction loom large over Moscow's entrenched presence in eastern Ukraine.

Conclusion

Well before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia had an established history of imperialism towards Ukraine. Both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union viewed Ukraine as an important territory, both politically and for resources. Putin himself has consistently glorified this imperial history in his rhetoric, and this imperialist attitude has increasingly been reflected in Russian domestic politics and foreign policy, culminating in the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its wide-spread support within Russia. From 2014 on, the Donbas region acted as a colony of Russia, allowing Russia to test out the international community's tolerance of its colonial aspirations, especially in the wake of the success of the annexation of Crimea. Though Donbas was not officially annexed until 2022, for the eight years between the beginning of the conflict and its annexation, Russia imposed its own government structure and Russian backed leaders on the region, heavily influenced its decision making, sponsored the

⁷² Studzińska, Zofia. "How Russia, Step by Step, Wants to Regain an Imperial Role in the Global and European Security System." *Connections* 14, no. 4 (2015): 23-24.

passportization of its people while also denying them citizen rights, and abused the image of Donbas to shore up support for Putin's authoritarian regime. These structures are in line with traditional colonial structures. The primary difference remains that, without significant material resources of benefit to the center, the periphery instead serves as a political resource that is periodically drained to stoke the nationalist and irredentist sentiments of the center. Within the wider context of the Russian-Ukraine War, the colonization of the Donbas region gives credence to the war as an act of aggressive imperialism.

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